Aug. 6 Action Stories of All Kinds

ARGOSY

WEEKLY

10¢

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Tyrant of the Steppes

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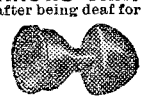

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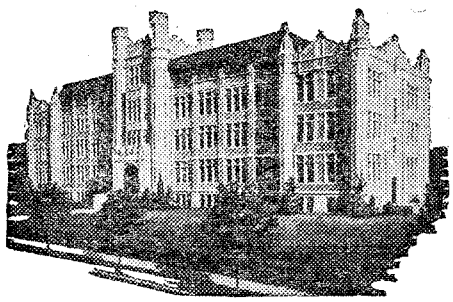

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ARGOSY

Action Stories of Every Variety

VOLUME 231 — CONTENTS FOR AUGUST 6, 1932 — NUMBER 5

COMPLETE STORIES

War Dragons (Novelette—Complete) . . . . . W. Wirt 4
Jimmie Cordie fights Japanese intrigue

Death by the Clock (Short Story) . . . . . Ray Cummings 63
Murder in the bath tub

One Error (Short Story) . . . . . Ferrin Fraser 97
The pitching ace of a steel mill nine

Men of Daring (True Story in Pictures) . . . . . Stookie Allen 124
Gen. George A. Custer, gallant Indian fighter

SERIALS

Tyrant of the Steppes (Four Parts. Part I) . . . . . Jack Allman 44
Adventure among hostile Siberian tribes

No Back Trail (Three Parts. Part II) . . . . . R. de S. Horn 75
Feud in the sheep and cattle country

Always Obey Orders (Three Parts. Conclusion) . . . F. V. W. Mason 107
Strife in Mexico under Maximilian I

The Unknown Island (Six Parts. Part IV) . . . . . Fred MacIsaac 126
Stranded in a South Seas paradise

OTHER FEATURES

COVER DESIGN . . . . . Paul Stahr
Flooding the Barren Lands . . . . . John H. Spicer 62
Where Horses Wear Pants . . . . . Armand Brigaud 74
A City Destroyed by Silence . . . . . Kenneth P. Wood 96
Argonotes 143
Looking Ahead! 144

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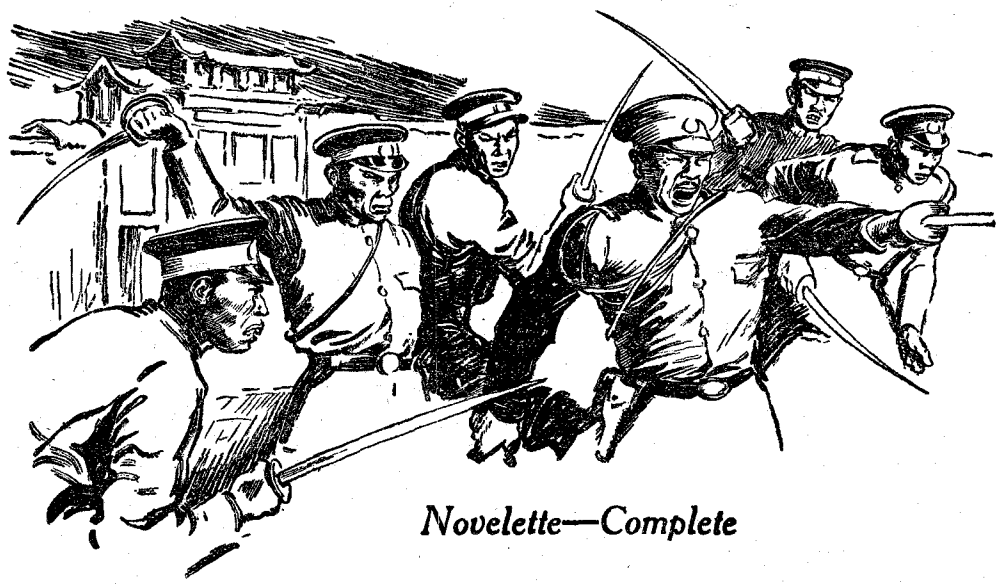
VOLUME 231 | SATURDAY, AUGUST 6, 1932 | NUMBER 5



Novelette—Complete

War Dragons

By W. WIRT

Author of "Aztec Treasure," "Jades and Afghans," etc.

Two Japanese officers in Manchuria drank a toast—a toast that was to send adventurer Jimmie Cordie deep into China on a secret and dangerous mission

CHAPTER I.

"WE WILL CONQUER!"

A COLONEL in the Japanese army sat at a well lighted, heated house in Mukden, Manchuria. There was need for the heat because of a blizzard outside. The colonel, when a particularly vicious gust of wind shook the old wooden house, looked up from the maps he was studying. He thought for a moment of his regiment and other regiments that a few months ago had been garrisoned in Japan among the flowers, and shook his head. He did not like the cold, he did not like Mukden, or Manchuria or active campaigning.

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The door opened and another Japanese officer came in. "I told your orderly that I would announce myself, Colonel Iyeharu," the newcomer said with a smile.

"You are welcome, Major Mito. At the moment you look like a snow man. The night is a bad one."

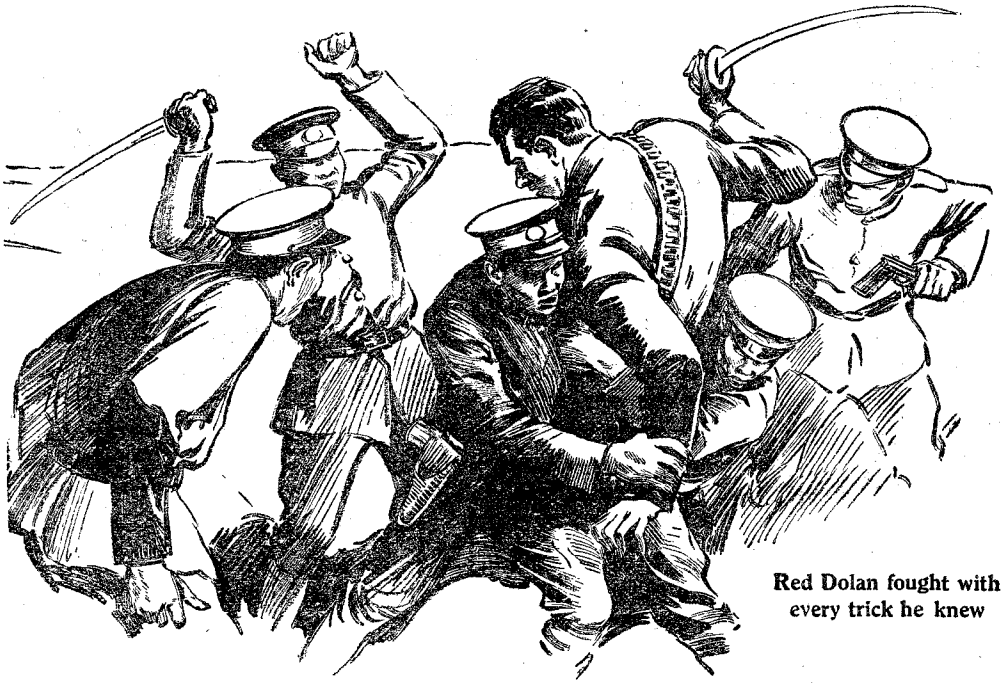
"Very," answered Major Mito, as he took off his coat and hat, shaking the snow from them into a corner of the room. "But I bring news that is not bad, comrade of my youth. And see what else I have brought." He took a bottle of brandy from his coat pocket, then tossed the coat on a chair. "So that we may drink a toast."

"You are more than welcome. You come with what you say is good news and also with a bottle of brandy. Mine was all gone and I was about to send my orderly for some. What is the good news?"

"First I will open the bottle and pour out the brandy into the glasses so that we may lose no time in drinking the toast."

Two minutes later, Major Mito said, "I drink to the day which will soon be here when our troops will hold all Shantung, Honan, Kiangsu, Anhwei, Chehkiang and Hupeh—in China!"

Long before he had finished naming these provinces held by the Nationalist government of China, Colonel Iyeharu was on his feet, his eyes shining, his body at attention.



Red Dolan fought with every trick he knew

"I drink the toast with you," he said formally. As he put his glass down, he went on, "But, Mito, are you sure? How do you know? It does not seem possible that the time has come to do as we have planned for so—"

"Always the doubter," interrupted Mito with a laugh. "I do know, and I—you know I have very strong friends at home and very little goes on that—"

"I know that your wife is the sister

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of the wife of the general staff chief," Iyeharu answered with a smile. "That is why you are so well informed, my friend. Sit down, please."

"No matter how. I wrote asking that I be transferred back to Tokyo and as you are my friend that you be transferred with me. I have received word that the transfer will be made soon and also the news about China. In sixty days, Nippon troops will land at Shanghai and take China, from Shanghai to the border of—"

A noise like the creaking of a board was heard. It came from the wall to the right of where the two Japanese were sitting. It did not sound like the wind had made it. It sounded as if some one had trod on a loose board that had turned a little.

Both officers were on their feet before the sound died away, both with their heavy service revolvers out. Instantly they emptied the revolvers into the board wall, spreading the shots from a foot up from the floor to the height of a man.

A shrill cry of "*Aie!*" was heard above the detonations and then, as they lowered their revolvers, silence.

The orderly ran in, his rifle at the ready. "Break down that wall," commanded Colonel Iyeharu.

The orderly reversed his rifle and with the butt easily smashed the flimsy wall boards out. Some fell out on the ground, but three of them fell across a body to another wall.

"Drag it out here," commanded Iyeharu, his face pale. The orderly dragged the body out into the room and both Iyeharu and Mito stepped up to the wall. "A passageway," Mito said grimly, "leading to that hole. Our engineers certainly did not examine this house before it was given you as headquarters."

"That explains why so many of our moves against the bandits have been blocked or met with force," Iyeharu answered. "Much was discussed in this room."

"Too much," Mito answered. "If what we have just spoken of becomes known, it will—"

"How could it? The one who heard lies there dead. He was going when we heard him." Colonel Iyeharu turned to the orderly. "Bring Captain Saime to me at once. He will be at the headquarters of General Osaka. You know Captain Saime. Do not tell him anything about what has happened and—do not tell any one else. Your life depends upon your tongue, Komura. You have served me faithfully for many years—see that you continue to do so. This is a matter that involves my honor."

The orderly, who had come to attention when Iyeharu spoke, saluted and went out.

MITO went to the body which was face down and turned it over with his foot. "He was Manchu and was very young. See, Iyeharu, we hit him five times. Do not look so woebegone. He heard what we said, it is true, but now the only ones he can tell are his ancestors. Take a drink and you will feel better."

The two officers sat and drank brandy until the orderly opened the door and announced loudly, "Captain Saime."

The Japanese military intelligence officer who came in was a middle aged man, with cruel looking eyes and thick sensual lips and nose. His manner was brisk and efficient.

He saluted and after the salute was returned Colonel Iyeharu said, "Major Mito and I were talking. We heard a

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noise in the wall, fired at the place it seemed to come from and this—" he pointed meaningly to the body, " is the result."

Captain Saime went over to the body and looked down at it. " I know him," he announced. " He is, or rather was, Hsai Lao Chang, eldest son of the Mandarin Yang Hui Chieh. So—this is where the leaks have been coming from. I thought that the old mandarin was acting as a connecting link. I will send for him and his family. We will soon know all about it."

But they did not soon know all about it. The detachment sent to the house of the old mandarin came back and reported that there was no one there and that there were evidences of a hasty flight out into the blizzard.

" Your shots were heard," Captain Saime said, " and some one outside who knew of this youth being here gave warning. What matters were spoken of?"

" Routine matters," answered Colonel Iyeharu. " The expedition against the bandit Tsinghai principally."

" I will soon find the Mandarin Yang Hui Chieh," Captain Saime said, " and when I do he will pay with his life for what he has done. His son has already paid. It may be that once he talks, we can plug other leaks. There are many Manchus here that are not to be trusted. I will take charge of the matter, Colonel Iyeharu. I speak for the military intelligence."

After he had gone, Iyeharu asked Mito, " You—but how could he? The one that heard is dead. If it were known that you and I openly discussed —what you spoke of—we would both be disgraced."

" And now we will be decorated for having discovered a spy," answered Mito with a smile. " Do not think any more of it. Can the dead talk to the living?"

YEN YUAN, old, fat, placid looking, with finger nails encased in golden sheaths, sat in the beautiful flower gardens of his palace in Hongkong. He looked more like some kindly, scholarly old grandfather than the head of the most powerful, dreaded secret society in the Orient. The T'aip'ing numbered some three million members and ranged from the highest official to the lowest coolie. Yen Yuan had the power of the high, the middle and the low justice and his orders were obeyed to the letter, without question or hesitation.

With him sat an old man, a Manchu, and a slim, black-eyed American.

" I asked that you do me the honor of coming here to my gardens, honorable elder brother," Yen Yuan said, " to hear a tale that I thought best told here where there is no chance of eavesdropping." His English was perfect—nor was there any reason why it should not have been. Yen Yuan had been educated at Oxford and at one time had been ambassador for China to England.

" The one who sits beside me," he went on, " cannot speak English. Therefore I will translate. O mighty mandarin of the fifth military class, I present to you Captain James Cordie, an American and my honorable elder brother. Captain Cordie is the one of whom I have spoken. You may speak freely to him. Captain Cordie, the Mandarin Yang Hui Chieh."

Jimmie Cordie, ex-adjutant, Foreign Legion, captain of machine gun company, A. E. F. and since the war fighter in the far places smiled as he answered, " I am honored by being presented to the Mandarin Yang Hui Chieh."

Yang Hui Chieh spoke, Yen Yuan

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translated and Jimmie Cordie listened. Finally Jimmie said, "Wait a minute, I don't get it. You said that your son was killed there in the house by the Japanese officers. Now you say that your son told you what the officers said."

The mandarin said something after Yen Yuan had translated and then Yen Yuan said, "His eldest son was killed. That night, his other son, a boy of fourteen, begged so hard to go with his brother that he was allowed to go without Yang Hui Chieh's permission. He went into the passageway with his brother and stood there.

"It was very cold, and after the officer said, 'In sixty days Nippon troops will land and take China, from Shanghai to the border,' the boy signed to his brother that he was going. The brother nodded and the boy started. It was his foot that turned the board that made the noise. The shots did not reach him, as he was some feet away from the place the noise was made when they came through the wall. They did reach his brother. The boy got out and ran home. There he told his father, and immediately the entire household fled."

"I see. Tell him to go ahead with the story, resplendent one."

"There is no more story to tell, Captain Cordie. That is all. The Mandarin Yang Hui Chieh left his wife and little son in a safe place and won his way to me. His work is done and now he must rest. Pardon me for a moment while I tell him so."

Yen Yuan spoke in Chinese, the mandarin answered, Yen Yuan spoke again, and this time when the mandarin answered he shook his head. Yen Yuan smiled and clapped his hands twice. A palace official standing some twenty feet away came forward and bowed. Yen Yuan gave an order and as he did the old mandarin rose from his chair.

He bowed to Yen Yuan and then to Jimmie Cordie and walked away with the official.

"HE is very obstinate," Yen Yuan said with a smile. "He will not stay here, he will not accept a guard of honor; all that he will accept is an escort to my gates. He goes to the house of a Manchu noble. Truly these Manchus are stiff-necked. He has his own people to guard him if necessary." Yen Yuan looked away from Jimmie at the flowers and the little artificial lake.

Jimmie Cordie sat still and waited for Yen Yuan to speak.

Finally Yen Yuan said, "The little men of Nippon must be stopped, honorable elder brother. I know their strength and also—I know the weakness of China. There are many generals—with as many armies—but they are fighting only among themselves for what they can loot. It may be that they would c o m b i n e against a common enemy."

"Some of them would sell out to Japan and turn their guns on the others," Jimmie answered, "and if they did not, they are not equipped or trained well enough to withstand Japan. There is only one man that I know of who could even hinder Japan, and even he could not once the Japs began landing divisions."

"You refer to General Tsai-Ting-Kai?" asked Yen Yuan.

"Yes. His Nineteenth Route army is fully equipped and he has many German and Russian officers, to say nothing of several Yanks and Johnny Bulls. His men have been taught discipline, trench construction and warfare. But he cannot whip Japan by

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himself; that is too big a job, O second father to me."

"Yet he might, as you say, hinder them?"

"There is no question about that, given that they only land a few thousand troops, thinking all they have to do is to kick a few Chinese out of the way in taking a walk across country. Once the Japs got mad at him, they'd mop up on his Nineteenth Route army. They'd have to, to save their face."

"Do you think that General Tsai-Ting-Kai could do what you call hinder them for—thirty days, clever one?"

"Depends on how many men they land and where they land them. If they land bluejackets and marines at Shanghai to take the native city and then push on to Nanking, General Tsai-Ting-Kai could stop them right there. And it would take time to bring a division over from Japan. I know the Japs well enough to know that they think they are invincible because they mopped up on Russia and have been able to chase the Chinese—up to date. So they think that they can do it this time just the same way. They'll start off with a few thousand men, and if General Tsai-Ting-Kai will move his army up back of Shanghai there is no question in my mind that he can make the Japs think they started out hunting rabbits with a shotgun and ran into a grizzly bear. How long he can hold them is another question, ruler of millions."

"Much can happen in thirty days, honorable elder brother. It may be that the men of Nippon will be withdrawn in that time."

"That's right," Jimmie agreed with a grin, "much can happen. There is an old saying in my country, 'First catch your rabbit before you start cooking him.' Applying it here, first get General Tsai-Ting-Kai to bring his army up to do the hindering. He'd get it shot to pieces and then the other generals would eliminate him and what was left."

"And yet it may be that he can be persuaded," Yen Yuan answered blandly.

THE Oriental looked over at the flowers, and again Jimmie sat silent, his eyes on the impassive old face of Yen Yuan. One minute went by, two minutes, three minutes, and then Yen Yuan looked back at Jimmie.

"Once you told me, honorable elder brother, that you knew Sahet Khan of the Uryankhes Tartars."

"I do, very well."

"He is in your debt?"

Jimmie smiled. "Why—I suppose he is, resplendent one. In a raid too close to the border of India he was taken by the English. They put him in a stockade at Akola. Without going into a long story, I helped get him out. He said that he was in my debt, but you know Tartars, mighty one, better than I do."

"Will you go to him, O second son to me, and deliver a message from me?"

"I'll try to get to him," Jimmie answered promptly, "but it's a long, rocky road between here and the Lower Mountain in the Thian Shan range, all-powerful one."

"That is true, peerless one. I cannot send Chinese or Manchus to him. His riders slay all who approach without waiting to ask questions. But you can go and ask him one. I mean, honorable elder brother, that you can reach him and deliver a message."

"I probably can," Jimmie answered, "given I can get within asking dis-

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tance. What shall I ask him, ruler of men?"

"Say to him this: Hold the Thian Shan for General Tsai-Ting-Kai against all who come from the west, and the jade hilted sword of Genghis Khan is yours. Yen Yuan, head of the T'aip'ing promises it."

Jimmie Cordie shook his head. "I doubt very much if he will do it. The Tartars think the Chinese far below them and to ask a Tartar khan to hold for a Chinaman—not so good. It might be possible that Sahet Khan would, to get the jade hilted sword."

"As you say, it might be possible that he would," Yen Yuan agreed blandly. "Will you go and ask him?"

"Why, yes. What connection has General Tsai-Ting-Kai with the holding of the Thian Shan?"

"This, elder brother. He wishes to become war lord of the North above all else. Always and ever he is working towards it. If he reaches finally to where he can proclaim himself war lord of the North, his army must be ready to fight the Soviet back if they attempt the passes of the Thian Shan. That is why, for the past two years, he has not joined in the fighting among the generals.

"If he is told that the Tartars will hold the Thian Shan range for him and he is offered other things such as unlimited money and support in the North, it may be that he will see his way clear to resist the little men of Nippon when they land."

"I see," Jimmie answered. "If you offer to replace his army in addition, he would probably fall for it. Will you detail Shih Fu to me, shining one?"

"Yes, and whoever else you wish. May the gods make your way smooth."

"We'll see what we can do towards that end ourselves," Jimmie answered with a smile. "Looks like the dragons of war may soon be lashing their tails and breathing fire."

CHAPTER II.

TORTURE.

MANDARIN YANG HUI CHIEH had come to Yen Yuan in a hired ricksha and had commanded the bearers to wait for him. Now, as he was being carried along the Street of Ten Thousand Delights back to where he was staying, he smiled a little. He did not know what the powerful T'aip'ing could do to stop Japan, but he knew that his part was ended, once Yen Yuan had been told what had been overheard.

A fight suddenly started up in the street and the ricksha seemed caught in the middle of it. The bearers put it down and fled. Yang Hui Chieh sat still for a moment, then as men brushed against it, almost overturning it, he got out. Two Chinamen near called, "This way, lord of the world! To the shop of Li Chang!"

Yang Hui Chieh looked over and saw a shop entrance at which the two Chinamen were pointing. He was old and his fighting days were over; also, he was Manchu and did not like to have milling coolies so close to him. He walked to the shop and entered. A Chinaman came up and bowed. "If you will deign to walk to the rear of my unworthy, miserable shop, resplendent one, there you will find peace and quiet until the mongrels have stopped killing each other."

Yang Hui Chieh bowed curtly and started back. As he passed a piece of velvet hanging on the wall it fell on him. Something hit him on the head and he went down, unconscious.

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When he came back to life he was seated in a chair in a room far underground. That he knew by the dampness and the stone walls. His legs were tied to the chair and his arms pulled back of him and also tied at the wrists. His head ached and he could feel that there was dried blood on his head and left side of his face.

Yang Hui Chieh said to himself as he opened his eyes, "I am in a trap."

The first thing he saw was the face of Captain Saime of the Japanese military intelligence. And then his eyes saw, back of Captain Saime, two Chinamen, and on the floor close to his feet, a tray of knives.

"You have come back to the land of the living, Chinese dog?" asked Saime, a cruel smile on his full lips.

"I am Manchu, not Chinese—little mongrel cur of Nippon," answered Yang Hui Chieh calmly.

"For that you die much more slowly, old water buffalo. Take off his right shoe and stocking," he said to the two Chinamen. One of them stepped forward and bared Yang Hui Chieh's right foot. "Cut a strip from the sole," Saime commanded. "A small strip. He is to be flayed very slowly."

The Chinaman stooped and picked up one of the knives. As he did, Yang Hui Chieh said to himself, "I must be careful, very, very careful. May the gods grant me strength to endure the pain until the right moment comes."

A strip of flesh fell away from his foot and his lips set in a tight line. The pain was almost unbearable.

"Before the next," Saime said, "how long did you have a listener in the house of Colonel Iyeharu?"

"For two months," answered Yang Hui Chieh.

"To whom did you repeat what was heard?"

"To Tsinghai, the bandit leader and to other bandits."

Saime laughed. "You are ready enough to talk, Manchu jackal. I thought that Manchus would endure to the death the torture without speaking."

"I am old," answered Yang Hui Chieh, closing his eyes so that the Japanese captain might not see the gleam in them. His right hand was coming loose. "Old and weak, little one of Nippon. If I can save myself torture, why should I not?"

"I am here to ask questions, not answer them, old fool. The night your son was killed, what did you hear?"

"My son was killed, as you say. How then could he report to me?"

"How were you warned so that you could flee?"

"One was on guard outside and heard the shots. He came to me."

"Now—what did you tell Yen Yuan of the T'aip'ing?"

"That I will not answer."

"Cut him again."

THIS time Yang Hui Chieh screamed in agony. He could have held it in, but he wanted Captain Saime to think that he was breaking.

Again Saime laughed. "You do not like that, Manchu war lord? Answer my question or there will be three more strips cut from your foot before I ask it again. What did you tell Yen Yuan of the T'aip'ing?"

Yang Hui Chieh moaned and twisted in his chair, "I—I—I cannot bear it. Yet I—I am Manchu and should—I told him what my son had repeated to me about the movements of Nippon troops and of the bandit Tsinghai."

"That is not all. What else?"

Yang Hui Chieh moaned and quivered as if cold. Inside, he was offering

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up a prayer that the chieftains of his House of Chieh who sat watching him from on high would also pray to the gods that he, Yang Hui Chieh, could play a Manchu trick on this pariah cur. The time was coming close when he must play it.

"Nothing else," he answered.

"Cut another strip," ordered Saime, his eyes showing the pleasure he was getting from the torture of an old man.

"Wait," yelled Yang Hui Chieh. "Wait, I will tell you. Spare me further torture!" His right hand was loose now. "I—I told him that the war lord of Szechuan would join Tsinghai if the T'aip'ing would assist him."

"So, that was it? I thought that there was more to it than the repeating of tales of what has already happened. What has the American, Captain Cordie, to do with it? He was also present."

"Nothing. I did not see him. He was not present while I was with Yen Yuan."

"You entered and then, a little later, he came. I think you are lying. Cut another strip, deeper this time. Then take off his other shoe and stocking."

Yang Hui Chieh swayed forward, upsetting the chair. His right hand and arm came around in front of him as he fell across the tray of knives. His hand grasped one and as it did, he laughed. A happy laugh, full of scorn.

"O little fool of Nippon," he said —and drove the knife deep into his heart. His lips were still smiling as the two Chinese turned the body over and as his spirit winged its way on high to be greeted with honor by the chieftains of the House of Chieh. The Manchu trick had worked.

That night, Captain Saime wrote to Colonel Iyeharu: "I have seen and questioned the Mandarin Yang Hui Chieh. He was receiving the reports from his son and relaying them to the bandit Tsinghai. He fled here to Hongkong to tell the T'aip'ing that the war lord of Szechuan would join the bandit, if backed by the T'aip'ing society. The matter is closed except for the questioning of an American soldier of fortune who may represent the war lord of Szechuan in some way. I will have him brought before me and find out what connection he has with the matter, if any. It is well to unravel all strings. I will then return to Mukden."

Yang Hui Chieh had died happy, believing that he had thrown Captain Saime completely off the trail. He had, but in giving the name of the war lord of Szechuan, which was the first name to come into his mind, he had, without knowing it, put the Japanese across Jimmie Cordie's trail to the Uryankhes Tartars. The way to the Lower Mountain was through the war lord of Szechuan's territory.

So, when Captain Saime and the men working for him saw Jimmie Cordie and some other white men leave in two T'aip'ing war junks loaded with men and equipment and head north, Captain Saime smiled as he said, "My guess was right. He goes to tell the war lord of Szechuan that the T'aip'ing will back him against Nippon. I will see to it that Captain Cordie and his friends do not reach Szechuan."

CHAPTER III.

COUNCIL OF WAR.

A COMPACT column marched north and west from Ningyuen, on the Gulf of Fuchan, where the T'aip'ing war junks had unloaded it. Six white men, one hundred bearers

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who were T'aip'ing swordsmen and one hundred riflemen, also T'aip'ings and all Manchus. The bearers carried more ammunition than anything else and sixteen of them—eight in the van and eight in the rear—carried four Browning machine guns, set up and ready to operate.

From the start at Ningyuen, the column had been looked over by several ambitious war lords and bandit chiefs. But in a very few moments the war lords and bandit chiefs had decided that they did not want a thing to do with the column—and did want the column to get past their particular stamping grounds as fast as possible.

The six hard bitten white men who wore belts heavy with cartridges from which swung holstered revolvers, the grim, scarred faces of the bearers and riflemen and most of all the ready machine guns, all helped what Jimmie Cordie called "the local talent" to reach the decision that the column was a good thing to let alone.

So, as far as Tsin-pong, on the west side of the Siramurin River, the march had been in the nature of a parade.

Red Dolan sat down beside the Fighting Yid and the Boston Bean, who were stretched out beside a fire. Camp had been made near the river, the stars were out and the weather was just cool enough to make a camp fire a luxury, not a necessity. The Yid had just said to the Boston Bean, "Vot could it be sveeter, I esk you? Ve are full of grub, de stars are out, dare is plenty of good vater, dare is cigarettes und dare is nothing to do till to-morrow. All de comforts of a home, ain't it, Codfisher?"

"Evidently Red doesn't think so," the Boston Bean answered lazily as Red sat down. "From the expression on our dear Mr. Dolan's face one would think he had been tasting sour pickles. What is the matter, Terrence Aloysius, me good man?"

"Yes, tell it to poppa—Irish loafer. Has any one been talking mit de harshness to—"

"Go to hell, ye Yid chimpanzee," Red Dolan, ex-Foreign Legion and lieutenant of military police, A. E. F. interrupted, "and that goes for ye also, ye long legged piece av Bosting tripe."

"Oi, vot a vay to talk mit friends," protested the Yid. "Ve only vant to know vhat is it de trouble."

"I know what it is, Mr. Cohen," the Bean said. "Mr. Dolan is mad because up to date there has been no fighting to do. Mr. Dolan craves action, Mr. Cohen."

"And who wouldn't?" demanded Red bitterly. "Here we are half way there and not wan teeny bit av a fight have we had. Bad luck to the dogs who take wan look at us and run away."

The Boston Bean laughed. "Stick around, Terrence, old kid. We're not there yet. I have a feeling that you'll get all the fight you're looking for very soon now."

The Boston Bean was tall and lanky and his face always looked sad and sorrowful. He carried himself as if there were nothing much left to do but go to sleep and he intended to start doing that at any moment. In the Massachusetts social register he was listed as John Cabot Winthrop, but in the Orient, wherever soldiers of fortune gathered, he was known as the Boston Bean or the Codfish Duke or any other name that even remotely suggested Boston.

The sad look and the sleepy manner were both misleading. The Bean was absolutely reckless and happy-go-lucky and, unless he were really asleep, never missed a note of the band. He had

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served in the Foreign Legion with Jimmie Cordie and Red Dolan and in the A. E. F. as a captain, attached to G-2-B, the secret service division of American Army Intelligence. The Boston Bean fought against any odds with a bored "you be damned" expression in his eyes.

"I hope so," Red answered. "All Jimmie will do when I ask him what the hell 'tis all about is to laugh and begin some damn stuff about the wild men up in the—"

A Manchu came up and bowed. "Captain Coldie's compliments and will you gentlemen join him in his tent."

"We will," answered Red, "wid pleasure. Ye needn't tell him, me bucko. We'll tell him ourselves."

JIMMIE CORDIE looked up and grinned as Red, the Bean and the Yid entered the tent. "Light and sit, gents. The board of strategy is about to strat."

"'Tis about time something was doing," Red said as he sat down beside a slim, boyish looking man, who with another man, was with Jimmie.

"Red is mad because dare has been no chance for him to do it any fighting," explained the Yid sociably.

"Stick around, Red," Jimmie answered. "I'll see if I can scare up a little fight for you pretty soon. Here it is for you birds. Up to the minute we've come through darn easy. But from now on, it's no man's land. The game is to get to the Uryankhes Tartars as fast as possible, deliver a message and then get home, also as fast as possible."

"Is that all?" demanded Red. "What the hell sense is there in our getting all hooked up to—"

"Keep quiet, Irishman," interrupted the Yid, "und maybeso Jimmie vill tell you. Pipe it down or Jimmie und me vill kick from you de slats, ain't it, Jimmie?"

"Let's have it a little later," the man sitting beside Jimmie Cordie interrupted. "Get down to it, Jimmie." He was George Grigsby, ex-Legionnaire and major of infantry, A. E. F., born in Breathitt County, Kentucky. Fully as big and as strong as Red, who weighed two hundred and thirty-odd pounds, he was known in the Orient as "a damn good man to have alongside" at any time. To the other reckless, devil may care soldiers of fortune, Grigsby was as a sheet anchor to windward. Mostly a silent man, he fought with a little cold smile in his eyes and on his lips.

"The children must play, George," Jimmie answered with a grin. "Listen, Red. What may seem darn foolishness to you may be darn important to some one else. This message to Sahet Khan must be delivered, come hell or high water. I've told it to you all. The whys and wherefores I do not know. If I did I'd tell you. Now, no matter what happens, as long as there is one man left, he must go on with it. Never mind any of that 'we'll all die together' stuff. There is too much at stake. Is that plain and agreed upon?"

"Sure 'tis plain, Jimmie darlin'," Red answered, still puzzled, "but what the hell can happen to us? Many's the time we have gone—"

"I know, Red. Maybe nothing will happen to us, but if it does, we're set. One man can deliver the—"

"Wait a minute, Jeems," the Boston Bean said. "I see that you've been reading 'Twenty Years After' which is quite all right. But what you didn't read in—"

"Been doing what?" demanded Red.

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"What the hell is Bosting Bean talkin' about, Jimmie?"

EVER since the day when Red Dolan had met Jimmie Cordie in the Foreign Legion, he would ask, "What now, Jimmie?" or, "How about that, ye small sized shrimp av the world?" The answer always satisfied Red. And if anything puzzled him, he would come to Jimmie, sure of a satisfactory explanation. Mr. Terrence Aloysius Dolan, born Cork, Ireland, would fight anything, at any time or place and he had only one remark to make when confronted by the foe: "Aw, slap 'em to hell outta the way." He loved the slim, black-eyed Jimmie Cordie far better than he did his patron saint and as Jimmie said, "hung around closer than nine hundred dollars in bad money."

"The Codfish Duke of Massachusetts means a book, Red," Jimmie answered, smiling at the big Irishman. "A man named Dumas wrote a book called 'The Three Musketeers.' It was about three soldiers who took another soldier into the party. Then later Dumas wrote another book, a continuation of the first and called it 'Twenty Years After.'

"In that book, the four soldiers were sent from France to England after something for the Queen of France. When they started, they agreed that no matter what happened, one was to go on. The Bean is insinuating that I copped the idea of one of us going on, from that book. And just between you and me and the bright North Star, I did. And it's a darn good one, also."

"I was going on to say," the Bean said, "that it would not work in this case because Jimmie is the only one that Sahet Khan will believe. What good would it do any of us to come staggering up to Sahet Khan and deliver a message about the jade hilted sword of Genghis Khan?

"Not a damn bit," went on the Bean, answering his own question. "He would think the one that did it was goofy and probably stick him in a pot of boiling oil. I've heard that he considers that a good cure for almost anything."

"I think the Bean is right, Jimmie," Grigsby said. "You are the one to reach Sahet Khan."

The boyish looking man, who had sat with a smile on his face, listening, spoke. He was John Cecil Carewe, once a flight commander of an air squadron in the British service. He flew for war lord or potentate whenever a flyer was needed who could fight as well as fly. No two men could look more different in every respect than Red Dolan and the slight, blond Englishman who bore a proud English name. Yet, inside, he and Red were as alike as two peas in a pod as far as their love of a fight went against anything at any time.

"I say, Jimmie, old thing, George is jolly well right, you know."

"Und how!" the Yid agreed. "Ve all smooth it de path for you, Jimmie. You do de gettin' dare thing und ve do de dying, how's dot?"

The Fighting Yid was about as broad as he was tall and his blue eyes seemed always to be about to pop out of his head with surprise at such naughty doings in a sad old world. He had been a first sergeant in a machine gun company, A. E. F., and since France had fought in the Orient for whoever needed his services.

Born on Hester Street, New York, and named Abraham Cohen, the Yid's surprised look was as misleading as the Bean's sorrowful one. The Yid was never surprised at anything. Wher-

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ever Jimmie Cordie and the rest were, there the Yid tried to be. If he was fighting for a war lord and found that they were on the other side, the Yid would promptly desert and cheerfully turn a machine gun on his former employer. Jimmie Cordie had once said, "The Yid is a soldier of fortune, neither pure nor simple," and that about sized the Yid up. He was born without ethics of any kind and never acquired any. Beyond that, if he had any nerves, no one ever saw him display them.

"Well," Jimmie Cordie answered, "you gents may be right, at that. Sahet Khan is darn apt to skin a stranger first and then think about asking him why he was up in the hills. We'll put 'er this way. I've got the ball and you birds are my interference, and Sahet Khan is the goal line."

"That's it, Jimmie," Grigsby answered. "Let's get some sleep."

CHAPTER IV.

TO THE RESCUE.

ABOUT noon the next day a Manchu patrol came in to the column which was entering a pass leading to the higher hills. "Three run towards the pass. Two youths and a maiden. Far behind, pursuing them, comes a small party of Chinese." He spoke in Pushtu, the universal language of the border.

"Let the maiden and the youths pass you," Jimmie ordered, "then capture the pursuing party or drive them back."

Ten minutes later a Chinese girl and two Chinese boys ran into the pass from the side of a hill. They saw the white men halted in front of the column, and the girl cried out shrilly, "Lescue! Lescue! Save us! Save us! We ale Chlistians!"

There is no "r" in the Chinese language and very few Chinese can make a sound like it. If it comes at the end of a word they can manage it, but if at the beginning or surrounded by other letters, an "l" is substituted.

As she was crying out, she was running towards Jimmie Cordie. The Chinese boys kept right up with her, and all three threw themselves at Jimmie Cordie's feet.

Jimmie stooped and raised the girl, who was about fifteen. "You're all right," he soothed. "Saved and everything. Calm down, little lotus bud. Nothing can hurt you now. See, here are many elder brothers to protect you."

"Vely bad men after me," the girl answered. "No let them hult me?"

"Hurt ye?" demanded Red, whom any woman could twist around her finger. "Let them try to do it, mavourneen. 'Tis us that will learn the black hearted dogs better."

The two boys got to their feet as the leader of the Manchu patrol came up.

"They resisted captule, lold, and we slew them," he reported in English of which he was very proud.

"Who were they?" asked Jimmie.

"That I do not know, black-eyed, smiling one. They wele Chinese, dlessed as soldiels. We allanged an ambush and they walked into it. Befole they could file, we wele on them, demanding sullender. They lefused—and we slew them all."

Jimmie smiled inwardly at the report. He knew how much time a Manchu would give an armed Chinaman in the hills to surrender.

"Send the patrols farther out until we get under way again," he ordered.

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"It may be that there is a larger body close."

The girl had been listening and now said, "Vely close, vely close! At Tsinan. Hully, hully, lescue Levelend Palker and wife and Missee Dola Palker and Missee Edith Palker and native Chlistians and—"

"Wait a minute," Jimmie interrupted; "take another breath, little golden one. Start at the beginning. First, who are you?"

"I am Wie-tze-fu-jen, Chlistian, and these youths ale Yo Fei and Hutahai, also Chlistians."

"Where did you run from?"

"Flom mission house near Tsinan. Please hully and lescue—"

"Come on, Jimmie," Red interrupted. "What the hell are ye standin' there for? 'Tis some missionary that's—"

"Hold it a minute, Red. Let's find out what we're going into."

THE girl, who had a pretty, intelligent looking face, answered, "The Levelend Palker and family ale at mission house near Tsinan. Vely bad war lold want Missee Dola Palker. Levelend Palker say no can have, and vely bad war lold say will take and kill Levelend Palker and lest of family. All native Chlistians vely much aflaid but me. All Palkers my family since I was baby. I say I lun to get good war lold to come to lescue. These youths say they come with me. We stalt out flom hole in back wall and bad war lold's men see. We lun and they chase us. You come lescue Levelend Palker light away?"

"Was the bad war lord attacking when you left for help?"

"Yes, plenty. In flont and along little liver. Not in back, vely steep hill go up."

"How many men has the bad war lord got?"

"Vely many. Hundleds, thousands—I do not know."

"That's definite. Well, the—"

"Jimmie, what are you thinkin' of?" demanded Red. "Wid a white woman and kiddies in danger are ye standing here askin' questions?"

"I've heard Chinese stories before, Red. Five minutes won't make much difference, old kid. How far is the mission from here?" to the girl.

"We lun down hill, along liver, up hill, down hill, then up hill to pass. I do not know how far. The sun has not moved much since we stalted."

"All right, we'll go over and take a look-see. It can't very far. These kids would have played out. Get a little ahead, peach blossom, and show us the way."

An hour later the soldiers of fortune looked down at a little valley, through their glasses, from the top of a hill. At one end of the valley, close to the hills, there was a square stone house. A stone wall about five feet high ran around the house about fifty yards away from it.

Gunfire could be heard, and little puffs of white smoke could be seen floating up from the wall. In front of the house, about two hundred yards away from it, were a number of Chinese soldiers, lying flat on the ground or kneeling down, firing at the house. Over by a little river were two or three companies, lined up in company front.

"The Reverend Parker is holding the fort," Jimmie said with a grin, "and doing 'er with black powder at that. Let's go down to the 'lescue.' And what the heck we are going to do with a missionary family along with us, the good Lord only knows. Shih Fu, take your swords to the right and

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come through the timber. Yid, you and Boston Bean take two of the Brownings and fifty riflemen. Ease down and come around the wall to the left. George and Carewe and I will start straight down. We'll wait until you get down. We'll see that the girl and the— Where is she?"

"Over there on the right with the Manchus," the Bean answered as he and the Yid started.

"All right, she's as safe with them as she would be with us. Make it snappy, gents."

The Chinese made no attempt to fight. They took one look at what was coming around the wall at them, another at what was coming down the hill and then they ran. The companies lined up near the river did not get much of a chance to run. The Manchus had taken advantage of cover offered and got very close before they charged. The deadly swords were among the Chinese, slashing in and upward in the Manchu death cut, before the Chinese recovered from the surprise of seeing swordsmen suddenly rise up from the ground. Very few of the Chinese reached the river to swim to safety.

"Some more av the cowardly dogs," Red said scornfully as he, the Yid and the Bean came up to where Jimmie and Carewe and Grigsby were standing in front of the house. "'Tis a fine piece av—"

"Darn funny that no one comes to—"

"Take a look over by the river and up on the hills, Jeems," the Boston Bean said, "and tell us how funny what you see is."

They all looked and Jimmie Cordie laughed. "Will you walk into my parlor, said the spider to the fly. We did."

"We can't hold them here, Jimmie," Grigsby interrupted. "More chance back of the wall. Here comes Shih Fu. They are evidently behind him as well."

The hills on both sides had suddenly become alive with soldiers and along the river there was marching a full regiment. As George spoke, a mountain battery opened fire. The shells went far overhead, but all of the men knew that range and elevation were easy to correct. The Manchus came up on the run and Shih Fu, leader of the T'aip'ing, a war captain who had been with Jimmie Cordie before several times, announced calmly, "There are two legiments of the monglels closing in flom the nolth, honolable elder blother. Shall I destloy them?"

"Not at the minute, little brother. We take the house and hold there—until we see what we are up against," he added. "It's probably mined, but what do suckers like us care? *Allons, enfants perdus!*"

UP to the wall and over it they charged, the soldiers of fortune leading with .45 Colts out and ready. Through the yard and into the house which was vacant and unfurnished in any way.

"Darn considerate of them to leave us a fort," Jimmie said with a grin.

"Maybeso pretty soon she go boom und up ve go," answered the Yid. "I hope it dot you've led it de good life, Irisher. I vould hate to be up dare playin' mit a harp und listening to the yells of a Irish gonif coming up from below."

"Ye are not there yet, ye Yid flat faced duck. What now, Jimmie, darlin'?"

"Stand 'em off. That's all I know at the minute. Get out to the wall, gents, and welcome our new boy friends who are coming to call. George and I will take a look for mines or whatnot.

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That little devil sure did play Delilah to the queen's taste. She ought to be on the stage and—"

A shell hit the house high up near the roof on the left side. The stone wall resisted it, but it was warning that the range had been corrected.

The Chinese tried out a direct charge from the direction of the river only to have it stopped by a withering fire of machine guns and rifles. They tried it again with the same results. Then, a little later, they tried to keep up a rain of shells on the wall and advance. But the mountain battery could not place the shells on the wall or very near it and after that try, the Chinese gave up attempting to take the house. The battery continued to shell the structure, but the walls were thick and the shells two pounders, so little harm was done.

The war lord, Wuting, turned to Captain Saime who stood beside him under cover of a windfall on one of the hills. "Many of my little brothers have fallen, O man of Nippon, and yet the foreign devils are not taken."

"They will be paid for as agreed," answered Saime, "and for every shell you fire, five shall be given you, also other ammunition and equipment. If your soldiers had been more prompt and had cut off the foreign devils from the house as was planned, mighty ruler of the North, the matter would be closed by now."

"My little brothers did not know that the foreign devils would come down from the hills so swiftly or that they would face Manchu swords. As you say, Nippon will pay."

"Is there water in the house?"

"Yes, water, but no food."

"We will starve them out. There is no hurry, peerless one."

"Then we await their surrender?"

"Yes. Draw the lines close and see that they do not break through. Order the battery to cease firing. They are doing no damage and wasting shells. The ones in the house cannot be frightened by noise. They are veteran fighters. Order that the regiments be moved so that they may quickly support each other. The foreign devils may attempt a sortie."

Captain Saime had followed the T'aip'ing war junks in a fast ship secured from a Chinaman in the pay of the Japanese and then had followed the column for a chance to cut Jimmie Cordie out of it or to destroy the whole column, he did not care much which. Saime was fully convinced that Jimmie was on his way to see the war lord of Szechuan, and had been sent by the T'aip'ing.

He would have liked to have questioned Jimmie the same way he had questioned the old mandarin, but he had despaired of getting Jimmie away from the column. So when the column got into the territory of a war lord friendly to Japan, Saime had arranged the trap. He, Saime, would get to the war lord of Szechuan later and arrange with him, which would help teach the T'aip'ing not to interfere with Nippon business.

The Japanese captain had a firm belief that any Chinese general or war lord could be bribed. Now, as he looked at the house, he smiled. The Americans had walked into a trap—and would stay there forever.

CHAPTER V.

OUT AND AWAY.

"WELL," demanded Red Dolan, as the sun went behind the hills, "are ye plannin' to stay all summer, Jimmie?"

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Jimmie Cordie laughed. "As soon as it gets a little darker, we'll start, Mr. Dolan. If you are in a hurry, you may start now. We'll catch up to you."

Red looked around at the hills, where innumerable camp fires were being lighted, and grinned. "I'll wait for ye, Jimmie darlin'."

"That's nice of you, Red. I'm beginning to think I need some one to hold my hand. The way I fell into that trap was sure a—"

"Any one would have fallen into it, Jimmie," Grigsby interrupted. "A trap baited with women and children in trouble is a hard one to avoid. It's water under the bridge, Jeems. Let's plan from where we stand."

"Only thing I can see to do is to shoot our way out. I'd like to know who set the trap. Darn few war lords up in this neck of the woods have brains enough to set the stage."

"Let's go," Red said. "'Tis plenty dark right now."

"Don't be in such a hurry, Red," Grigsby answered. "They will wait for you. Jimmie, this bird, whoever he is, has got at least a thousand men and a mountain battery. We saw and heard that much. He knows the hills and we don't. Let's say we start in the dark — what then? It's a cinch that whoever set the trap wants us—or you. We will get a fight—"

"Have I lived to see the day that ye hesitate at a fight, George Grigsby?" demanded Red. "Do ye mean to sit there and tell us that we can't slap all the Chinks in China outta the way? Jimmie and me will take ye by the hand and—"

"Put a jaw tackle on," Jimmie said. "Never mind that slapping thing for a minute. Go ahead, George."

"The hills between here and the pass are full of blind cañons and gorges, and given that we get to the pass we'd be stopped in any narrow place where the hills come close. If it were just an attack by bandits or tribesmen I'd say do what Red wants to do, slap 'em out of the way and go on about our business.

"But this bird has at least two organized regiments and some big guns. That shows that he is no footloose gent rambling around to see what he can pick up. If it were in the open and they jumped us, it might be different. But here, they know where we are, and we don't know where they are or will be. If we get caught in a blind cañon or in a place where the Brownings can't operate to advantage, they will hold us, Jimmie."

It was a long speech for the taciturn Grigsby, and all of the men listening sat quietly, their eyes on his face.

"All of which means?" Jimmie asked.

"This, Jimmie. Whoever it is has presented us with a stone fort. There is water here and we have plenty of iron rations. We will make a sortie towards the river and while we are doing it you leave by the rear for Sahet Khan. It's the interference you spoke of, old kid. We can last here for a long time—and once you are in the clear, can start for home any time we get ready. If we don't make it there is nothing lost."

Jimmie Cordie studied for a moment. He knew that during a fight he was just as liable to get killed as any one else. And he felt that George Grigsby was right as far as the outfit they were up against was concerned. If the expedition was wanted bad enough to elaborately trap, it would not be allowed to fight its way to the pass and then be left alone. The three charges showed that.

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"All right," he finally said. "Here, I'm boxed up. In the hills I've got a running chance to make it. I'll take Red and ten of the Manchu swords, commanded by Shih Fu."

"That is traveling pretty light, Jeems," the Boston Bean said.

"The lighter the better. Especially in getting through the lines this gent has established according to the fires."

"Vy not split it up?" asked the Yid. "I go mit Jimmie und Red und—"

"Red and I will go," Jimmie said. "It's dark enough, George. Let's get started off. If we don't see you apes again we've had a nice time at your party, haven't we, Red?"

"We have," answered Red as he rose. "What will we take wid us, Jimmie?"

"Our Colts and 30-30 rifles. In this case, Mr. Dolan, a good run is much better than a poor stand."

The sortie was started off by a burst of machine gun fire in the direction of the river, followed by the long drawn out war cry of the charging Manchu swordsman. Out of gates came a column, machine guns in front.

"LOOK! They are going to try to win clear," Captain Saime cried as he rose from where he was sitting with the war lord Wuting in front of a tent. "We will destroy them this time. I thought they would try for the river. Are the regiments in place?"

"Yes. Listen! You can hear the ones coming up from the rear to cut the foreign devils off from the house. This time they will be in time."

The regiment at the rear did get around in front of the house, but instead of having the backs of men to fire at, suddenly found themselves right in the path of a charge.

The column had gone some three hundred yards towards the river, then whirled about and started back to the house. The regiment, that had been on time, melted away under merciless machine gun and rifle fire and those who escaped bullets met Manchu swords.

"More of my little brothers die," Wuting said coldly. "Truly, this is an expensive matter for Nippon."

"Nippon will replace your little brothers and also will pay in gold so that your sorrow for those who have died will be eased. The foreign devils will not try again. They did not even dare to try the crossing of the river. Now we can wait them out."

"Is the matter so important, then?"

"As I told you, ruler of the North. If the war lord of Szechuan combines with the bandit chief, Tsinghai, it would mean that a Nippon division must be sent to the West. Separated, Nippon can handle them all, but to allow one combination to be made means that others will also be made. So, I stop the—"

A wounded Chinese officer staggered up to Wuting. "Two of the foreign devils," he gasped, "and a small unit of the Manchus, O Lord of Tsinan. They came through like devils and the guard left could not stop them. *Aie!* The sharp swords that—"

"Two of them?" questioned Captain Saime. "Describe them."

"One—was—slight and dark. The—other—was—a great—man with—with—I go into the coldness to—"

"Not yet," rasped Saime. "Hold yourself here. Was one—"

"One said—in the language of the foreign devils that I was taught in—in—what does it matter where? I am about to ascend the—"

"Not yet. What was said?"

"'That's the boy, Jimmie,' and then,

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'Come on, Led. Quit your foolin' alound.'"

As the Chinese officer finished, he fell at Saime's feet.

The war lord Wuting looked at the Japanese captain and said blandly, "Speaking of waiting them out, what now, O man of Nippon?"

"This," answered Captain Saime coldly. "All that has been promised you, you will receive. More if you hold the rest of the foreign devils and their Manchus here until I return. I wish to see them die."

"You are going somewhere?"

"Yes. Order that men who know the hills make ready to go with me."

"In which direction are you going?"

"North and west. The game has just started, mighty one."

CHAPTER VI.

TWO PLOTTERS.

TIENSUNG, war lord of Szechuan, sat on a dais in one of the smaller audience rooms of his palace at Szechuan. In front of him stood the nervy Captain Saime.

He needed nerve to make a fast trip across country with only a few men furnished by Wuting, knowing as he did that the chances of his reaching Szechuan were a hundred to one in the face of the roving bands of killers of all kinds that swarmed through the hills, making them a madhouse of fighting. And it took cold nerve to demand an audience with the war lord of Szechuan, known for his almost insane cruelty and merciless treatment of any in his power, no matter who they were.

Tiensung looked down at the Japanese captain, who stood at attention. The little pig-like eyes of the Chinese war lord seemed to be fully closed.

"You have my permission to speak, captain of Nippon," he finally said.

"That of which I wish to speak, mighty war lord whose fame rings around the world, is best spoken where other ears than ours cannot hear. It is a matter between my Emperor and you—of whom the stars have said—will rule the North."

"Under Nippon's supervision," Tiensung answered smoothly. "It may amuse me to hear you—as will your screams under the torture amuse me if the matter does not interest me." He raised his right hand a little, and the officers that stood behind him and the rifle guard that stood on either side of the dais left the audience chamber.

"You may proceed, Captain Saime. First, bring that chair from the wall and place it here beside me."

To tell Captain Saime to bring a chair instead of clapping his hands and ordering that the chair be brought was in itself an insult. Captain Saime obeyed, his face impassive. But he was saying to himself, "Some day you will pay of that, Chinese dog."

"Now start your tale," Tiensung said as Saime sat down, "and make it an interesting one, little soldier of Nippon who is far away from the guns of his Emperor—and close to the knives of Lingeh'ih." By Lingeh'ih he meant the "lingering process," the slicing to death.

CAPTAIN SAIME felt that Tiensung was playing with him as a cat plays with a mouse, but did not show it on his face or in his eyes.

"This, then, is my tale, O war lord of Szechuan. One is on his way to you with the following message from the T'aip'ing society: Join with the bandit chief Tsinghai against the forces of Nippon and you will receive the back-

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ing of the T'aip'ing in all that you wish to undertake. This I say: Refuse to do so and you will be paid what you wish to ask by Nippon and once the bandits and foolish generals who are now offering resistance to Nippon are destroyed, you will be given the North to rule over, backed by our guns. The T'aip'ing cannot withstand us, powerful one."

Tiensung sat still, his eyes still two-thirds closed, his thin lips tight, his face as impassive as that of a stone idol. Was this little soldier of Nippon crazy? Or was it a trap? If a trap, who was setting it? He, Tiensung, to be offered the support of the T'aip'ing? He, who was of the Chao Ho society that even now was at warfare with the T'aip'ing? And the combining with the bandit Tsinghai with whom all men knew he had a blood feud. All men but these men of Nippon who were truly fools. He would walk softly in the matter until he found out the truth.

"The T'aip'ing is very powerful," he answered smoothly, "and here in China. The Emperor of Nippon is far away. And Tsinghai is a war brother of mine. Together we have fought in many battles." This last to see if Captain Saime knew anything about Tsinghai.

"The T'aip'ing will not be powerful, once we have taken—once we have taken over Manchuria, commander of countless armies. This I offer you, gold enough to make you the most powerful war lord in the North, the backing of Nippon with which the backing of the T'aip'ing cannot be mentioned in the same breath, and the overlordship of the hills."

"You say that one comes?"

"Yes. He should arrive at any time now. He left Tsinan just before I did. May I suggest something?"

"You may."

"This: Await his coming. Then, after he has told you what the T'aip'ing will do for you, compare it with what I have offered or will offer after hearing what he has offered."

Tiensung opened his eyes a little and looked at the Japanese captain who spoke Chinese so fluently. "I will do as you suggest, Captain Saime. It may be that the one who comes has got lost in the hills. I will send out searching parties. It will be arranged so that you may hear his offer. You have my permission to depart."

"May I stay a moment longer, mighty one? I crave a boon."

"Men seldom crave boons when in my presence," answered Tiensung coldly, "except for release by death from torture. What is it?"

"That if, after hearing the one that comes, you decide to join with Nippon, that he be given me for questioning."

"First I will do some questioning myself," Tiensung answered. "After I do, if I join Nippon, you may have him." He added to himself, "You will also answer some questions, little soldier of Nippon."

After which he again gave Captain Saime permission to depart. The Japanese captain saluted and backed out of the room, his bearing very military and confident.

"IS your leg hurting very much, Red?" Jimmie asked. He and Red, with four of the Manchus were sitting on the ground, just outside the mouth of a little cave, far up in the hills. Below them and on both sides, under cover of rocks and trees, were Uzbeg tribesmen. And on the rock ledge that led to the cave were quite a few bodies, mostly tribesmen, the other bodies being those of T'aip'ing swords-

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men. Shih Fu, wounded in the right arm, sat with Jimmie and Red.

"Not so bad, Jimmie. Me head hurts more. How is the wrist av ye?"

"Pretty stiff, Red. That cut paralyzed the muscles, I guess. Your wounds, little brother," to Shih Fu, "are they deep?"

"No, honolable elder blother. Alleady the blood has ceased to flow. Shall we again lesson these jackals?"

Jimmie Cordie grinned. "Our lessons don't seem to stick. I'm afraid they are very stupid scholars, Shih Fu. We'll wait until night and then see if we can get through them."

The first night out from the stone house they had successfully avoided several parties of armed men of various races. The day that followed had been spent holed up. The second night had been as the first, but as it broke dawn the second day, they had run into a mounted band of Uzbeg tribesmen. And in a place where there was no chance to get away on either side. It was a case of retreat or fight through.

They went through, but in doing it Jimmie took a slash across the wrist from a sword, Red got a kick in the leg from a horse and as he staggered to one side, an Uzbeg sword just barely reached the side of his head. Shih Fu had a bad cut in his right arm and two or three more light ones in his shoulder and leg. Two of the swordsmen went down, dead before they hit the ground.

"'Tis only swords they have," Red said, "and us wid Colts. I'm going to get me wan av those swords. Wid it I will slap all the wild men from here to hell outta the way. I see wan wid a pretty hilt, Jimmie. I'll get it and—"

"Heads up!" Jimmie warned. "They are coming up! Use your rifle, Red. Shih Fu, take your swords over to the left. We will—"

"Get goin' wid the highbinder friends av ye," Red said quietly. "I'll hold 'em, Jimmie darlin'."

"I couldn't get a mile, Red," Jimmie answered with a grin. "I've lost too much blood. The interference is disbanded. We'll take 'er right here, together."

UP came the Uzbegs, disdaining all cover. It was as if they had decided to wipe out the little party up at the cave without counting losses.

The two 30-30 rifles began an unhurried and methodical bang . . . bang . . . bang—and at each report an Uzbeg fell.

"It won't be long now," Jimmie said with a smile as he reloaded.

"'Tis the way I wished to go," answered Red, "wid ye beside me and—"

"Chinese come!" called Shih Fu. "Many of them, with lifles!"

The Uzbegs evidently saw the Chinese as Shih Fu did. They stopped climbing the ledge and ran for their horses.

Five minutes later a Chinese officer bowed to Jimmie Cordie.

"You Captain Coldie?"

"Yes, I am Captain Cordie—and you?"

"I am Major Ch'ienlung, Thild Lifle Legiment of the war lord of Szechuan. I was sent into the hills to escolt you to Szechuan, Captain Coldie. While sealching for you, the sound of filing came to us."

"You were sent to escort me to Szechuan? Then my presence was—may I present Lieutenant Dolan. Red, this is Major Ch'ienlung."

Jimmie had switched to the introduction when it had suddenly dawned on him that it might be possible that Yen Yuan had asked the war lord of Szechuan to ease him, Jimmie Cordie,

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on his way to Sahet Khan. Like Captain Saime, Jimmie knew nothing of a war between the T'aip'ing and the Chao Ho society.

Red looked at the dapper young Chinese officer and grunted, "H'r'ye." Mr. Dolan never cared much for the Chinese.

Major Ch'ienlung smiled and bowed to Red, then said to Jimmie, "I will have litters made to cally you and Lieutenant Dolan, Captain Coldie."

"I think that there will be another litter necessary," Jimmie answered, then as he looked around and saw that Shih Fu had disappeared, went on, "but I see that he is able to stand, so the litter may not be needed."

Why Shih Fu had disappeared, Jimmie did not know; but if he had, there was some reason for it.

Major Ch'ienlung had been looking at Jimmie and Red, and while he had noticed a little group of Manchus standing near he had not counted them and did not miss one when he glanced over at them as Jimmie spoke.

"We will be in Szechuan in five hours, Captain Coldie," he said. "Thele you will find doctols to tleat your wounds."

CHAPTER VII.

A SWORD IN HAND.

TIENSUNG had no intention of letting Captain Saime be present at any conference he, Tiensung, had with Captain Cordie. At least, not the first one. Like all Chinese, Tiensung held audiences very early in the morning, around four o'clock or earlier. The Japanese captain was sound asleep when Tiensung entered the room where Jimmie Cordie had just been awakened by an official.

On the way to Szechuan, Jimmie's wrist had become infected and he had developed a high fever. So high that he had become delirious and had to be tied to the litter. On arrival, he was taken to one room and Red Dolan to another. It was a week before Jimmie became sane once more, and now, as he sat up on the couch, he was still very weak. The treatment by the Chinese doctors had cured the infection, but the cure had almost sent Jimmie on the one-way trail.

"You ale well enough to talk, Captain Coldie?" asked Tiensung. He had waved his escort and a doctor out of the room and ordered that no one be allowed to approach within fifty feet and that all rooms on either side be vacated. Tiensung did not want any one to hear what the T'aip'ing had to offer. The mere fact that it was offered might lead the head of the Chao Ho society, if it were overheard, to think that Tiensung was flirting with the T'aip'ing, and the thinking would be fatal to Tiensung.

"I think so," answered Jimmie. "Enough to thank you for the rescue, O war lord of Szechuan, and the courteous treatment we have received here in your magnificent city."

"My unwolthy effolts to make you comfoltable hele in my miselable degladed collection of huts is not to be mentioned in the same bleath as the honor of having you hele. I have heald much about you, Captain Coldie, and of the othels who fight at your side. You fought the machine guns for Genelal Kwang Tung at Yangchow?"

"Yes, m'ghty one. You were there?"

"On the other side," answered Tiensung smoothly. "My little blothels chalged many times against the guns only to be dliven back. Befole we come

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to the matter of your coming, Captain Coldie, will you, in the gleatness of your condescension, explain to me something that I have often wondeled about?"

"I will if I can, ruler of the North."

"It is your connection with the powelful T'aip'ing Head, Yen Yuan."

That puzzled Jimmie Cordie. If Tiensung had a message for him or had been ordered to further him on his way to Sahet Khan, he, Tiensung, would know the answer. But there was no mystery about his connection, and he answered promptly.

"Once, many years ago, I was a student at one of the institutions of learning in America. There was a young Chinese student there with whom I became friendly. He was in a strange and, to him, hostile land. He spent as much time with me as he could and seemed to like me very much. One day I missed him from classes, and after making inquiry, found him to be sick with a virulent fever. He had been taken to a hospital, and I found him there. He was in the shadow of the valley of death, O commander of armies.

"All that money could buy, he had, but he lacked a friend. I stayed there with him for a month, and did what we call in America, 'kidded' him away from the valley of death. Later, after the World War, I met him by chance in China. He took me to his father, Yen Yuan. I could not persuade either Yen Yuan or Shanhai Li that I had not saved Shanhai Li's life. Yen Yuan announced that I was his honorable elder brother. I know that an order went out through the T'aip'ing that I was that, and that I was to be treated as such by all who wished to keep on living. Does that explain, war lord of Szechuan?"

"Yes, vely fully, Captain Coldie. You ale not, then, a member of the T'aip'ing?"

"No, I am not a member, resplendent one."

"The matter is plain to me. Now, what is the message flom Yen Yuan to me, Captain Coldie?"

"I have no message for you, lord of Szechuan. I thought that you had received one to relay to me or that you had been requested to further me on my way. There has evidently been a mistake made by some one."

"On your way to whele?" asked Tiensung.

JIMMIE CORDIE was on guard now. The trap at Tsinan and now this war lord asking that a message be delivered. He answered readily, "On my way to the shrine of the Mings. There are some jades up there in the hands of one of the old priests which are of interest to the T'aip'ing. Jades that were carved by the first head of the mighty society."

"I see," answered Tiensung. "As you say, thele has evidently been a mistake made by some one." He rose as he continued, "Lest and get stlong, Captain Coldie. When you ale able to tlavel, I will fulther you on your way."

"He doesn't say to where," Jimmie said to himself. Aloud he asked, "The one who was carried here with me? I would like to have him here. And the Manchus who were also brought to your famous walled city?"

"The one that was callied hele will be blought to you. The Manchus ale the honoled guests of my soldiels. You ale sule you have no message for me?"

"Very sure," answered Jimmie with a smile. "Who told you that I had, illustrious one?" He did not expect to have the question answered, knowing the Chinese—and it was not answered.

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"An idle tale was told me," Tiensung said as he turned toward the door. "Lest and get stlong, Captain Coldie."

Jimmie, after Tiensung had gone, settled back against the pillows that propped him up. "No so good," he murmured as he closed his eyes. "That bird has something up his sleeve. Looks like—I—jumped out of—the frying—pan, right smack—into the fire." As he finished, he went to sleep.

Tiensung went back to his palace, his face as impassive as ever. He believed what Jimmie had told him and his brain was as active as his face was still, planning just what to tell Captain Saime the T'aip'ing offer was. He would make the Japanese captain top the offer and then let him have Captain Cordie to do with as he saw fit.

It might be that under torture the foreign devil would reveal interesting things. If he died still denying that the T'aip'ing had sent him, Captain Saime would put it down to the obstinacy of the American and the chances were that Captain Cordie would admit anything to gain respite from pain.

All in all, as Tiensung went to his gardens he was very well pleased with the turn of affairs. To have Japan bidding against, or thinking she was bidding against, the T'aip'ing for his support, was a very good thing as far as he went.

He was sitting in the gardens when Captain Saime was brought in front of him. Behind Tiensung there stood several officers of his staff. There was a chair placed a little to the right of him.

"YOU have my permission to sit down," he said as Captain Saime saluted. As the Japanese captain sat down, Tiensung held up his right hand and bent it backwards. The staff officers dropped back out of hearing.

"The messenger from the T'aip'ing sent for me early this morning," Tiensung went on blandly. "He thought that he was about to go howling out into the cold darkness where all spirits which have inhabited the bodies of foreign devils go when released. He wished to deliver the message before, therefore I went to him. I regret that there was not time to have you aroused so that you could accompany me."

That did not fool Captain Saime at all. He knew just what Tiensung had done and why he did it. But he did not show the knowledge as he asked, "Did the spirit of the foreign devil go howling out into the cold darkness, mighty war lord?"

"No. It was a fainting fit. The doctors brought him out of it. He is better than ever, now. You may have him for questioning—as soon as our matter is settled."

"May I ask what the T'aip'ing offer is, ruler of the North?"

"You may," purred Tiensung. "If I will at once march to join Tsinghai and help him resist the forces of Nippon, I will receive one million taels, a division fully equipped and later, when Nippon has been driven from Manchuria, control of the North from the Khinghan Mountains to the Siberian railroad."

Captain Saime smiled, "Too little, mighty one. Nippon offers two million taels, all the divisions you need to control your territory which will be from the Khinghan Mountains to the Amur River and south to the Siramuren River. Also the Thian Shan range."

"The Thian Shan is held by the Uryankhes and Altai Tartars. It would take many divisions to unseat them."

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"The divisions will be furnished, O ruler of the North. The passes of the Thian Shan must be fortified against the Soviet dogs."

"How will the money be paid me?"

"I will send for it, resplendent one, and remain here until it comes. Now—may I have this Captain Cordie to question?"

"Yes. The matter is closed. Let Nippon live up to the agreement and I will hold the North for her. I know of this American Captain Cordie. He will be a hard man to make admit anything."

"I will make him talk," answered Captain Saime, his full lips taking on a cruel twist, "if you will detail your torturers to me."

"I will. First, I will send for him and the one who came with him. Question both of them. The big man with the flaming hair may also know things. If they do not answer quickly, I will have them taken to a place where they will answer—and only you and I and the torturers may hear."

RED DOLAN'S wounds had been light ones and as he stood by Jimmie Cordie's side in front of Tiensung and Captain Saime he was as good as ever, save in one respect. His temper was rapidly becoming unleashed.

Jimmie was so weak that he could hardly stand and Red knew it. He saw the Chinese war lord and the Japanese captain sitting down and Jimmie standing in front of them, trying hard not to sway back and forth.

"Captain Coldie," Tiensung said blandly, "the one sitting beside me is Captain Saime of the folces of Nippon. He also undelstands English so I will speak in that language."

"Oh, ye will?" snarled Red, glaring at Tiensung. "And who the hell do ye think ye are, leavin' Jimmie Cordie to stand while ye and that little monkey-face sit in chairs? Have a chair brought for Jimmie Cordie and be quick about it, ye flat-faced scut."

It was plain to be seen that Red's temper was entirely gone—and with it what sense of discretion he had. To call a war lord a "flat-faced scut" when the war lord sat in his walled city, was something few men would do, even if backed by a couple of regiments. But Red Dolan did it, standing there without a thing on him except his clothes. Their rifles and Colts had disappeared right after they got to Szechuan.

"Steady, Red," Jimmie said calmly. "Let him make the play."

"I do not know what a flat-faced scut is," Tiensung said velvetly. "I will ask you to explain it to me, later. At the moment, Captain Saime wishes to ask Captain Coldie some questions."

"What ye will do first is to have a chair brought for Jimmie Cordie," Red said. "Are ye to be sittin' there fannin' the mug av ye and Jimmie, who is sick, to be standin'? Wan av him is worth wan hundred and wan av ye half-baked tin war lords."

"For Pete's sake, Red," Jimmie interrupted, "you are doing your best to get us both killed. Please—let me handle it, old kid."

Tiensung's own temper was none too good at any time and he never had to hold it—unless he was with other war lords stronger than he in men.

"You dale, you monglel of a foleign devil? You dale? You will die vely slowly in—"

"Aw, go on back to the laundry," Red interrupted scornfully. "Ye wear a sword, don't ye? Put wan in the hands av me and stand in front av me,

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man to man, ye yellow faced gibboon. I'll show ye whether I dale or not, what the hell ever that is."

The air felt cold and rare to Jimmie's nostrils and eyes, seemed shimmering and dancing in little waves of light that would turn to darkness every so often. For some unknown reason, Red's defiance began to seem very funny to Jimmie. As Red finished, Jimmie laughed again, and said, "That's the boy, Red. If that 'yellow faced gibboon' doesn't start him off—put the black curse of Cru'mel on him. I'm with you, old kid Dolan."

Tiensung paid no attention to what Jimmie said. He was looking straight at Red with eyes that were like those of a king cobra.

"You ale a swoldsman?" he asked smoothly.

"Good enough for the likes av ye," Red answered contemptuously.

"I cannot closs swolds with you," Tiensung went on, "because it would be beneath me, vely far beneath me. But—" he turned and called to the line of officers, "Kwang Liu, come forward,"—the last in Chinese.

ONE of the officers came up and saluted. "Give your sword to the foreign devil with the flaming hair. I will honor you by giving you mine with which to give him the death of the thousand cuts. Afterwards, you may keep my sword and the one he has defiled will be destroyed. See how many cuts you can make before he dies." Then Tiensung turned to Captain Saime, "The one who has defied me, dies now. You may have the other to question. This one dies to wipe out the insults he has offered." This in Chinese.

"As you wish, lord of Szechuan," answered Captain Saime indifferently. "Captain Coldie will tell me all I wish to know."

"What are the monkey faces sayin', Jimmie?" asked Red.

"I don't know, Red. Evidently you are going to be given a sword and—"

"'Tis right ye are! Here comes the lad that come up to the cross between a—"

"Save your breath, old-timer," Jimmie interrupted, and he swayed a little. "You'll need it. The time's gone by to be calling names."

"I'll get ye his sword in a minute, Jimmie," Red answered, "and then we'll run these scuts from here to hell."

"If we can't, who can?" asked Jimmie, smiling at Red. "Make it snappy though, Mr. Dolan." What Jimmy really thought was that he and Red were as close to the angel of death as they ever had been and this time they had no chance of avoiding the meeting. But he smiled at Red, the old reckless, happy smile.

"'Tis a good sword," Red announced as he balanced the sword that Kwang Liu had handed him. "It won't take me but a minute, Jimmie darlin'. Then ye will have wan."

"Fair enough. Get me one and we'll go home."

Kwang Liu, a master swordsman, stepped up to Red, fully confident of his ability to do as ordered. He advanced his blade a little, contacting Red's to feel out the strength of Red's wrist. He found out in less time than a split second. Red was as fast as he was strong and absolutely ignored what the other man might be doing to him once swords were up.

During the time that Kwang Liu had to think or see anything further on this earth, he thought that he saw a bolt of lightning flash down and strike his blade, tearing it from his hand. Then

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he thought he saw another bolt go up. He did not even see it come down to his head. Kwang Liu, master swordsman, fell dead, almost cut in two.

Red let out a wild Irish yell and stooped for Kwang Liu's sword. As he straightened up with it he shouted, "Here it is for ye, Jimmie! Now we'll—Mary Mother!" Jimmie Cordie was lying face down on the ground.

"Jimmie! Jimmie! Are ye dead?" He dropped the sword and ran over and knelt beside Jimmie Cordie, all else forgotten.

"Seize him!" shouted Tiensung, rising from his chair. "Take him alive! He dies in the boiling oil!"

As the officers ran towards Red, Jimmie opened his eyes. He saw Red's woebegone face and smiled. "I'm back, Red. I must have— Heads up!" Jimmie was facing so that he could see the oncoming officers.

CHAPTER VIII.

SAHET KHAN.

THE FIGHTING YID sat down beside the Boston Bean on the wall of the stone house. "You know it something, Codfisher?"

"One or two things," answered the Boston Bean lazily. "Not more I will admit, Mr. Cohen, but I'll stand on the fact that I know at least two things—and both of them are that I am getting tired of this house party. Let's go home."

The Yid grinned. "Von of de Manchus sneaked it out last night und vent all over de city of dis var lord dot thinks he is holding us here. He says dot it vould be duck soup mit gravy to smack him in de pants. Dot battery has been moved down from de hill und parked by de var lord's palace. Und de regiments is all playing pinochle und drinking—"

"Playing what?" the Bean demanded. He had not been listening closely to the Yid. The sun was warm and the Bean was about half asleep.

"Vell, he didn't say it pinochle," admitted the Yid. "Anyvay, dey is all mit de belts loose."

"Does George know it?"

"Yes. De Manchu vas telling it to him und I vas dare. George says dot Jimmie und Red know dot ve are here und dot dey vill come back dis vay to see if ve are still here, so ve might as vell stay put."

"Well, George is probably right at—" The Boston Bean stopped talking. Both he and the Yid had seen Shih Fu, with Grigsby and Carewe, coming towards the wall.

"Here it is for you birds," Grigsby said, "Jimmie and Red ran into some Uzbegs and got some of that fight Red was looking for. They both were wounded and about to pull that Custer's last stand thing when a Chinese officer showed up with a company. He announced, after the Uzbegs ran, that he had been sent to escort Jimmie to Szechuan."

"Dot he had been sent? Vot de hell? How did it any von know dot Jimmie—"

"Ask some crystal gazer," the Bean interrupted. "Go on, George."

"Shih Fu tells me that the war lord of Szechuan, whose name is Tiensung, is a member of the Chao Ho society which is at war with the T'aip'ing. What that has to do with sending an officer out for Jimmie, and how they knew that Jimmie was in the hills, is—as the Yid says—'vot de hell.'" Grigsby smiled at the Fighting Yid.

"Didn't you tell it to Jimmie?" asked the Yid of Shih Fu.

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"My honolable elder blother was wounded and so was the lord of the flaming hair, honolable Yid. Thele wele five of the T'aip'ing left, including me. The officer of Tiensung had with him some fifty liflemen. If I had told my honolable elder blother and he had leflused to go, we would have died thele or been taken captive and callied to Szechuan. I could do nothing dead or as a plisoner in Szechuan. So I disappealed and came to lepolt. The lines that this dog of Tsinan ale maintaining alound the stone house have many holes in them."

"You did right, Shih Fu," Grigsby answered. "I think that we may as well call it a day here and take a little walk over to Szechuan. With Jimmie here, it was all right to hole up and push him along towards Sahet Khan the way he wanted to be pushed. I don't think we could have made it if we had started with him that night. This war lord was hooked up for us then. Now it is a horse of another color. Let's see what this gent can offer to stop us going to Szechuan. We haven't any one along now to watch over."

"O. K. mit me," the Yid said.

The Boston Bean stretched lazily. "I think a little walk would do me good."

"Right old dears," Carewe announced. "We'll go to Szechuan and ask the jolly old war lord why he sent for Jimmie and Red, what, what, what?"

Grigsby laughed. "All right. Let's go."

The column almost reached the hills before Wuting, war lord of Tsinan, was able to offer any resistance that amounted to anything. He had heard that another war lord was getting ready to attack him and had brought the battery down from the hills to help defend his city, also one of his regiments.

By the time he got his battery in position and a regiment started to get between the hills and the foreign devils, the column had brushed aside the few companies that stood in the way.

Wuting, seeing that the column would make the hills, and not wishing to lose any more of his "little brothers" who would be needed in the coming fight with the other war lord, did not order an advance in the hills. From what he had seen, he was quite content to have the foreign devils get as far away from him as they wished.

A FEW minutes later, in the hills, Carewe, who was walking beside Grigsby, said, "I say, I've heard of this war lord of Szechuan, George, old thing. We can't take his city with the men we have. He has a jolly old standing army that from all I've heard is a—what is it Jimmie calls it—oh, yes, a bearcat. And his city is walled. There is a chap I know who fought for him once. This chap isn't given to drawin' the long bow and he told me that this war lord of Szechuan's army was fully equipped and whatnot. If he is holding Jimmie and Red, what's the giddy old plan?"

Grigsby smiled. "Up to the minute, there isn't one, Carewe. At least I haven't one. I know that Szechuan is a good deal different than Tsinan. There they had got over the tension of watching us and the regiments had been moved away from the stone house. That bird evidently thought that we were afraid to come out. All I can think of is to send Shih Fu or one of the other T'aip'ing into Szechuan and find out whether Jimmie and Red are there and still alive or what has hap-

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pened. Then try and plan a rescue if, as I said, they are there and alive."

"Right," answered Carewe. "Once we find out that Jimmie and Red are there, we may be able to seep enough men through the gates one by one to cut them out, what, what?"

"We may," Grisby agreed, "and in the meantime, let's speed up a little. If we make a forced march, Shih Fu tells me that we can be close to Szechuan in three days."

The third day, about noon, the Yid was telling the Boston Bean about a brilliant idea of how to take Szechuan, which the Yid claimed he dreamed the night before. "I go in as de ambassador of Cheeseslovakia all dressed up mit feathers und var paint und everything und you come mit as my chief foot varmer mit—"

The Bean had just begun to interrupt with, "You are still asleep, Mr. Cohen. I will be the ambassador from—" when a T'aip'ing patrol ran up to Grigsby and Carewe. The Yid and the Bean stopped discussing dreams and ran up to see what was being reported.

"Mounted men," the leader of the patrol was saying when they arrived. "Many of them. One thousand, thlee thousand, fifty thousand! They cover the hills."

"Which way are they heading?" asked Grigsby.

"This way. Stlaight for us. Shih Fu stay to watch them for a few minutes. He say tell you, honolable major, be vely quick take position to defend. He say no can lun or no can fight them in open."

"All right, Taokwang. Get back to Shih Fu and tell him I say for him to fall back to the column." As the T'aip'ing turned and ran, Grigsby looked up at the hills on either side.

"Up there on the left," he said curtly. "We'll see what we can do for them."

"You didn't dream anything about this, did you, Mr. Cohen?" asked the Bean, as he and the Yid climbed.

"No, Codfisher," answered the Yid with a grin, "dis don't need it no dream, old kid. If dey are riders und anyvare as near as strong as Taokwang says, de dreamin' days is over."

THE first riders to appear around the sharp turn of the pass spotted what was up on the hill to their right instantly. They let out wild yells of glee. Here was some fighting for them to do. There was some open ground on their left, and they rode into it, as other riders came around the turn. More and more until the pass and the open space was filled with big men on stocky, shaggy ponies.

"Look," Carewe said, pointing up at the hill to his right.

"Und ven you get it through looking dare," the Yid said, "Take it a look over by the left und up back of us. Also dey are climbing."

Shih Fu, who had arrived as the column reached the place it was going to make a stand, turned to Grigsby. "They ale Ulyankhes Taltals," he announced. "I did not lecognize them befole."

"Uryankhes Tartars? If Sahet Khan is with them, I may be able to—" He stopped talking as he took out a white handkerchief. "Get me a rifle," he ordered. A rifle was brought him and he tied the handkerchief to the muzzle. Then he stepped out of the rock barricade that had been hastily thrown up and waved the rifle.

The flag of truce was greeted with yells of scorn from the Tartars below who were just starting a charge on foot. That they were going to pay no

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attention to it was evident. But as the charge advanced, a few more yards, a rider came around the turn, followed by two more. They forced their horses through the press without regard for any in the way.

The charge stopped as if every man in it were frozen. The first rider pulled his horse to a plunging halt and looked up at Grigsby, who was still holding the flag of truce. When the rider appeared, Grigsby had just commenced to lower the rifle.

Finally the rider turned his head and said something. The other two riders dismounted and walked up the hill to where Grigsby stood.

"What is it, English dog?" one of them snarled in Pushtu.

"Not English," corrected Grigsby courteously. "American."

"You start with a lie," the other rider grunted. "You are English. I have slain too many of you not to know."

"America where Americans live is a country that was once owned by the English, and the Americans are—"

"Well, what do you want, English dog?"

"This. Is Sahet Khan with his riders?"

"There sits Sahet Khan on his horse—Englishman."

"Take me to him."

"What? Take you to Sahet Khan? Fool, you had much better die here than on the sharpened stake or in the hot oil, as you will if you come within his reach."

The Tartar who spoke wanted a fight, not to see a surrender or terms made with Sahet Khan.

"There is a matter I wish to discuss with Sahet Khan," Grigsby answered calmly. "It may be that he will not thank you if you prevent his hearing about—the jade hilted sword of Genghis Khan."

"What? You rave, English dog! What do you know about—"

"I will tell what I know to Sahet Khan—not to you. Take me to him."

"Come, then."

Sahet Khan, of the Uryankhes Tartars, looked down at George Grigsby and said coldly, "Well, what do you want of me?"

"I want to tell you this. Captain James Cordie, who rescued you from an English prison, is in the hands of the war lord of Szechuan, a prisoner, as you were once. He was on his way to you with a message concerning the jade hilted sword of Genghis Khan, your mighty ancestor." Grigsby spoke slowly and distinctly.

"Captain Cordie in the hands of the mongrel of Szechuan! He with whom I swore blood brotherhood a prisoner, as you say truly, I once was! What is this about the jade hilted sword of the Great Wolf of whom I am a direct descendant? You dare lie to me, Sahet Khan, Englishman?"

"I am not English. I am American, as is Captain Cordie. He bears the message for you about the sword, not I."

"He has it?"

"That I do not know, Sahet Khan. This I know—he is a prisoner in the hands of the war lord of Szechuan. We are on our way to the rescue. And you?"

"Who are you?"

"I am George Grigsby, one of the men with whom Captain Cordie has been for years. The others on the hill are also men with whom he has shared his bread and salt. One other he has with him. We started with him to you."

"Come with us, friends of my blood brother. There is peace between us—

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unless you have lied. If you have, you die on the sharpened stake."

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE TORTURE CHAMBER.

RED turned his head as Jimmie Cordie said, "Heads up," and saw the officers of Tiensung closing in. "I'll smack 'em out from under their hats," he announced. "Rest easy, Jimmie darlin'."

Red had dropped the sword as he ran to Jimmie, and before he could get back to it the officers were on him, striking at him with the hilts of their swords and the butts of their revolvers. Red Dolan went berserk and became as deadly as a wounded grizzly bear.

The Chinese officers were lighter, much smaller men, and they were also trying to obey Tiensung's command to take Red alive. One of them kicked the sword Red was after out of the way, but that did not prevent Red's getting a sword. He tore one from the hand of an officer, breaking the officer's wrist as he did it. He swung the sword up, only to have his arm grasped by two assailants and pulled further back. He fought with every trick he had learned in street fights in Cork and in the Foreign Legion and finally broke the holds on his sword arm.

Jimmie Cordie, as the officers closed with Red, tried to get on his feet and would have made it if Captain Saime, who had run up, had not pushed him back to the ground by placing a foot against Jimmie's chest.

"Stay right there, Captain Cordie," he said mockingly, "and rest easy, as the red-headed fool advised." Then Saime, after seeing Jimmie go down, turned a little to watch the fight.

A Chinese officer staggered past, his face a smear of blood. A little past Jimmie he wavered, then fell. Red had got him in the face with a full left swing, caving it in as far as cheekbone, nose and jaw went. As the officer fell, he dropped his heavy service revolver.

Jimmie Cordie began inching over to it, very slowly. Finally he reached it and took it in his right hand. Captain Saime's push had been far from gentle and it had almost sent Jimmie back into the shadows. It seemed to Jimmie that he spent a million years in cocking the gun. Finally he made it. Then, with an effort that took all of his remaining will power and strength, he sat up, just behind Captain Saime.

"Turn around, Captain Saime," Jimmie Cordie said.

The Japanese captain whirled around at the sound of Jimmie's voice, his hand going to his revolver butt.

"I thought that you might like to have the hole in front," Jimmie went on calmly. As he finished the sentence he shot Captain Saime dead.

Red heard the shot, and thinking that some one had shot Jimmie, broke through the circle that inclosed him. He was blood from head to foot and his sword was dripping blood. He looked like some great prehistoric caveman as he charged in Jimmie's direction.

He saw Jimmie with the gun in his hand, saw the body of Captain Saime, and he saw Jimmie get up on his knee to rise. Red let out the yell that the Dolans had charged to on many an Irish battlefield for more than a thousand years, and then, as he reached Jimmie's side, shouted, "Jimmie! Ye scut! Now we'll give 'em hell! Back to back, Jimmie! 'Tis us—"

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Jimmie, from his knee, shot and killed an officer who had run at Red, his sword hilt raised for a downward blow.

And the echo of the shot seemed to suddenly multiply a thousand times in the hills. Then it changed into the staccato, snarling, *Tat-Tat-Tatatat* of machine gun fire.

"An attack! From the hills! To your war stations!" Tiensung shouted. An officer, who had been running through the gardens, reached him.

"The Uryankhes Tartars attack, lord. With them are foreign devils who have machine guns. The Second Regiment in the hills hold them back, but cannot do so long against the Tartar charges and the machine guns."

"Report to Colonel Wang that reinforcements are on the way to him and he is to hold to the last man."

"What's coming off, Jimmie?" Red asked.

"I don't know, Red. I got two words. They were 'Uryankhes Tartars.' It may be that—"

Tiensung, in passing three or four of the officers who had been trying to pull Red down, gave an order. They advanced on Jimmie and Red with drawn revolvers, halting well out of Red's reach.

"Sullender or die," one of them called.

"Go to hell, ye—" Red started.

"That's plenty, Red," Jimmie interrupted. "Why die now? Let's stick around a little while. Drop that sword and put your hands up." As Jimmie spoke, he dropped the revolver.

"Come with us," the officer who had spoken ordered.

"I'll carry ye, Jimmie."

"Nothing doing. I can walk, old kid. Are you badly hurt?"

"Who, me? 'Tis mostly Chink blood on me. If ye say so, Jimmie, I'll slap 'em to hell outta the way and we'll go over the wall."

"I couldn't even walk to the wall, let alone help in that slapping thing. Come on, Mr. Dolan."

IT was not far to the House of Punishment to which Tiensung had ordered them taken, and Jimmie made it on his feet. It was a one-story wooden building with no windows, to the left of the palace in a space where there were no other buildings.

"Take care of these foreign devils for Lord Tiensung," the officer said to the tall gaunt Chinaman who had been called to the door by a guard who stood outside.

"I will, resplendent one," he answered grimly. "Very good care. They will be here when my lord comes."

Jimmie and Red were led to a cell at the rear of the building and locked in it. There was no furniture of any kind in the cell, and the air was foul.

"What now, Jimmie?" Red demanded as he sat down, back to the wall.

"That's easy," Jimmie answered as he leaned against the cell door. "We rest here in peace and quiet until the Uryankhes come for us. What could be sweeter?"

"Hell of a lot of things," Red said promptly. "For wan—what's that?"

It sounded like a cross between the long drawn out scream of a mountain lion and the wail of a lost soul in the darkness. It came from somewhere beneath them.

"May the good Saints, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, protect the wan who yelled," Red said, crossing himself. "Where are we, Jimmie?"

"I don't know, Red. If you want a

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guess, we're right over the place where Tiensung does his inquisition stuff."

For three or four minutes Red prowled around like a caged animal, treading softly so as not to awaken Jimmie Cordie, who had dozed off. He tried the door to see how firm it was, and found that it was too firm to be even shaken. He sat down again, this time with his back to the wall on the left side. As he settled his weight against it he felt it give a little.

"What the hell now?" he muttered. "Is the damn' buildin' fallin' down under the weight av me?" and as he spoke, he turned and pressed his hands on the boards of the wall.

Two minutes later Red knelt beside the half conscious Jimmie Cordie. "Wake up, Jimmie darlin'! Wake up! Jimmie, wake up!"

Jimmie's eyes opened. "Get away from me, you big ape. I was sound—"

"Jimmie, come awake. I pushed the wall open and there's a trapdoor and steps leadin' down to the divil knows where."

"You did what? You're dreaming, Red. Get away from—"

"I am not, Jimmie. Wake up and be the old self av ye. 'Tis a way out of this dump, maybe. Wance out and wid—"

Jimmie Cordie laughed. "I'm all right, Red. That nap cleared my brain, anyway. Tell me again."

"Turn the head av ye and see the hole in the wall. I sat down and rested the back av me against it and she gave on me. I pushed wid me hands and away she went. The boards was rotten and like paper, Jimmie. In the next room there is a trapdoor in the corner av the floor. I lifted it up and there is steps going down."

"Yeah? Get away so I can get up. That nap opened up a reserve strength tap I had in me somewhere. I'm me old self wance more, Terrence Aloysius. Let's see where the steps lead to."

THE steps led down to a tunnel which was perfectly dry, paved with stone and pitch dark.

"What now, Jimmie?" Red asked, as Jimmie reached the bottom of the steps, Red having gone down first.

"Forward, Mr. Dolan. Let me go first. This—"

"What? I will not. 'Tis sick ye still are. I'll go—"

"Listen, Red. The Chinese have a pleasing habit of letting prisoners think they are escaping. This tunnel may lead up into the middle of the warden's office for all we know. Or there may be a hole in the middle that will drop us a few thousand feet. I'm lighter on my feet than you are and can—"

"Go on ahead then. Wait till I get hold av the belt av ye."

The tunnel curved a lot and several times pitched either up or down. Jimmie felt cautiously with his foot before he put it down. After five minutes' walking he said, "One thing is dead open and shut; we won't come up in the warden's office, anyway. Maybe this is a private way to the palace."

"Whatever it is," Red answered, "we are on our way, Jimmie darlin', and that's better than bein' in that room. I hope she leads to where I can get the hands av me on a sword."

"If hopes are being passed out, I hope that she leads beyond the walls right smack into the middle of—"

"What happened?" Red demanded as he bumped into Jimmie's back.

"I tried to push some steps down with my nose," Jimmie answered. "Stay put for a minute until I feel around and—here's the end, Red."

"Let me go up first. No tellin'—"

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"It's a cinch there'll be another trapdoor or whatnot. I couldn't push a mouse up or over. Go ahead, Red, and don't make any more noise than you can help. We're inside the walls yet."

Red climbed the steps, a few more than were at the torture house end of the tunnel. His head hit against wood and he ducked. "I hit the top," he announced. "If this damn thing don't give way on me, I'll push the buildin' off us, Jimmie."

"Go ahead and push and don't talk so much," Jimmie answered from the darkness below.

Red put his hands against the wood he had hit with his head and slowly straightened up. The steps creaked as his brawn went into the push, then something gave above and light came streaming into the tunnel.

"'Tis done, Jimmie," he said. "Up wid ye." As he spoke, he was on his way up.

When Jimmie got halfway up, Red's face, shoulders and arms appeared. "Gimme the hands av ye. No wan is here. 'Tis a temple near the wall. No wan can see us from the—up ye come."

The trapdoor that Red had pushed up had been secured by an old rust eaten chain and padlock. Red's strength had torn the screws from the rotting wood.

The room they were in was one that was evidently used or had been used as a storeroom for temple and priestly paraphernalia. It was crowded with images of the gods, bases for them, urns, temple banners and chests containing the robes of priests. There were two windows, both overlooking the wall of the city, about a thousand feet away.

Jimmie eased over along the side to where he could look on an angle out one of the windows. "Heck, they can't see us," he said. "I see them. Holy cats! The whole army is there. There goes another battery up the runway to—to—" he left the window and sat down on the base of an idol.

"What the hell are ye doin' now?" demanded Red. "Takin' another nap? Come on, Jimmie, let's go and find us—"

"Pipe down," Jimmie interrupted, absently. "There must be—"

A MINUTE passed, then another, and the third was half gone before Jimmie spoke again.

"Red," he began quietly, "get it out of that brick-top head of yours that we can fight our way out to the hills. No two men or fifty-two alive could do it. If we can't frame something and put it over, we are as much sunk here as we were at the other end of the tunnel. First, do you know what temple we are in?"

"I do not. All Chink temples look alike to me, Jimmie darlin'."

"I don't doubt it. Well, we are in the Temple of the War Dragon."

"How the hell do ye know that?"

"I know by the banners on the walls and the images of the Dragon's servants, nitwit. Why do you suppose we've been let alone here for so long, in a temple where there are fifty or sixty priests?"

"I dunno. Why?"

"Because they are probably up on the walls with the Dragons of War."

"And a hell av a lot av good it will do them to—"

"Darn right it will do a lot of good. Red, get this. The Chinese are the most superstitious race of people on earth. They know that the War Dragons are made and manipulated by the priests and yet, to the Chinese, the dragons are real. You sabe that?"

"I do not. Go on wid it if ye do."

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"Let me put it this way. They kid themselves into believing that the imitation dragon they see is the real thing. You remember the boy and the rope trick in India? You know, where a rope is thrown up in the air and a boy climbs it? People really think they see—"

"I got you, Jimmie darlin'. The Chinks want to think it is a real dragon and so they do."

"That's the boy, Red. They can even see the priests' legs, but that doesn't make any difference. When the soldiers see the War Dragons paraded in front of them, facing the enemy, they honestly believe that real War Dragons are there to help them. The psychological effect gives verisimilitude to—"

"Whatever that is. I believe ye, Jimmie darlin'. What do we do?"

"Wait a minute. Believe this also, old kid Dolan. One slip and we're done. You used to play parts in the Cork theater, you tell me. Can you play one now—for our lives?"

"I can. Come on wid it. What wid the big words and all, I'm sunk. Tell me what the part is and I'll play it to the end."

"Fair enough. Now, there are all sizes of War Dragons, big, little and middle sized. We'll hunt around and find a two-man size. Get in it or under it or what the heck ever the priests do and start for the wall where the runway is they've been using to get the big guns up.

"Now, if there are any priests around outside they may know that it isn't according to rule for a small sized dragon to show. If there are and they see us, it's good night and good-by, Mr. Dolan. If there aren't any of the said priests around, we've got a fighting chance to make the wall and get in front of the soldiers. Once there—let nature take its course. That's the best I can do for us at the moment."

"And a damn fine best it is, ye shrimp av the world," Red answered joyfully. "Come on!"

CHAPTER X.

THE DRAGON.

THEY went silently and cautiously through to the next room, then the next and the next—like a big grizzly and a lithe wolverine stalking their kill. There was no sign of life around the temple and no sound except the gunfire from the walls and answering fire from the hills. Through a big hall and then into another wing of the temple.

All of a sudden they heard voices that came from a room to their left. The door of the room was open and Jimmie and Red side-stepped along the wall until they came close to it.

"Two talking," Jimmie said softly, knowing that a whisper carries farther than a low natural tone. "Maybe more, listening. I'll take a look-see." He was on the side of the door and by gently pulling it towards him could look through the crack.

"Four old men," he announced as he turned to Red, "working on a dragon. It's the workshop, Red. Three or four dragons in there. No killing if we can help it. Knock 'em out."

One of the old men saw the two foreign devils as they came through the doorway on the run and let out a feeble squeak of terror. The others looked up and as they did Red slapped with his open hand the one who had squeaked. It was like the cuff of a bear's paw and the old man fell from his stool, out before he hit the floor.

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Jimmie, as the man nearest him rose, uppercut him. The man folded up like an accordion and joined the first on the floor. Red reached out and got a third man by the collar of the blouse and drew him in. As he did, the heel of his left hand connected with the man's chin. The fourth man drew a knife and thrust at Jimmie, who sidestepped the thrust and knocked him out with a clean right to the point of the jaw.

"And that's that," Red announced, looking down at the four unconscious Chinamen. "What now, Jimmie?"

"Pick out a dragon to fit us," Jimmie answered with a grin. "That one over by the wall looks about a two-man size, Red. Wait a minute. They'd spot our legs. Pull the pants off a couple of the sleepers while I go and look the dragon over."

TIENSUNG was not afraid of the Uryankhes Tartars as long as he was inside his walled city. In the hills it would be a different story. He manned his walls with his regiments and his big guns, even though it cost him the Second regiment to do it.

The Tartars had ignored Grigsby's suggestion that the outposts of the regiment be silently destroyed by the Manchus, one after the other, and the regiment cut off from the walls. To Sahet Khan and the rest of the Uryankhes, the Chinese were like so many rabbits to be rounded up and slain. But this time the Tartars went up against a veteran, fighting regiment, well armed and disciplined. After the first recoil, the Second regiment of Tiensung dug in across the passes and little valleys that led to the walls and put up a fight.

"Oi, such a business," the Yid complained to the Boston Bean who was on the next machine gun, during a lull. The Tartars had charged directly across the line of fire and the Yid and the Bean had to stop shooting. "Instead of sneaking it up on dem und den over de walls, de Tartars see some von to fight und dey did it. In the meantime, vot becomes of Jimmie und Red, I esk you?"

"If I answer that question I'd open an office as fortune teller, Mr. Cohen. Maybe this war lord won't hook up the attack with them and will lay off until —there the Tartars go over the rocks! That's the finish of the right of the line."

"Vot good vill it did us?" asked the Yid peevishly. "By now dis var lord has got it everything on de valls but de mortgage."

"Look on the bright side of things, my distinguished friend from Hester Street," the Bean answered with a grin. "It may be that right now the War Lord of Szechuan is shivering in his shoes, waiting to give up his city."

George Grigsby came up with Carewe. "You birds feel like a little forlorn hoping?"

"Sure ve do," answered the Yid promptly. "We are svell forlorn hopers, ain't it, Codfisher?"

"As forlorn hopers we are in a class by ourselves, Mr. Cohen," answered the Bean gravely. "What brands of forlorn hoping have you to offer, gentlemen?"

"How does this one suit you?" Grigsby said. "Shih Fu and his men just brought in a wounded Chinese officer they went out to get. The officer knows all about Szechuan, and he told Shih Fu all he knew. There is a place on the north wall that is being repaired and about half of it has been pulled down. Sahet Khan will fake an attack

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at the gates and at the east and west walls.

"We can get fairly close to the north wall by going up a hill and then down through the timber. The idea being to go over the low place and after asking the first persons we meet where Jimmie and Red are, go and get them and get out. Sahet Khan has too much sense to make a direct attack on the walls, and once this war lord knows that, he may take time to figure Jimmie and Red are hooked up with the attack in some way. If he does—"

"Good night for Jimmie und Red," finished the Yid for him. "Ve are mit, George, ain't ve, Beaneater?"

"We am. Let's go, gents."

A CHINESE regiment, coming up on the double to protect the wall, saw a small War Dragon come in stately fashion down the temple steps and start towards the wall.

The colonel shouted an order, and the regiment swung out to give the dragon plenty of room. The soldiers cheered as they passed the dragon and called encouragement to each other. "See! The War Dragons come to help us! They will breathe fire on the dogs who attack!"

If they could have heard what was being said inside the dragon, the cheers would have been changed to yells of rage at the profaning of a sacred thing by foreign devils.

"Jimmie! Steer the damn thing. I'm blind as the bat av Kilkenny. Walk straight. I'm stumbling all over hell."

"This dragon is supposed to wiggle, dumbbell. But if you stumble you'll be doing that little thing in hell right after. Stay with it, Red. Lift up a little if you can. It's pretty heavy on my shoulders."

"What? Sure will I lift, Jimmie darlin'. Is that better? Tell me when we get there."

"I will. Stick along. Not far now. When we get to the runway I'll stop a minute. Then, if we make it up and onto the wall, when I say, 'Now!' throw it off you and jump. That's all I can think of."

"I'm wid ye, Jimmie."

The dragon made the runway and then, after a pause, went up it. Chinese soldiers at the rapid fire guns and the heavy battery and the supporting infantry, those that saw the dragon coming, made way for it, cheering as the regiment had done. Jimmie Cordie could not see much on either side, but could see enough to steer the dragon through the spaces left by the guns. The wall was about fifteen feet wide, and he reached the edge.

Just as he was going to say "Now!" he heard a yell of rage almost beside him. A priest of the War Dragon's temple, one of those not being used to help carry a dragon, had come up. This priest knew that only the dragons that were already on the wall were to be used and had, as soon as he saw the unscheduled dragon, come up to find out why it was out of the temple.

The pants that Red had put on were far too small for him around the waist, and he had put his belt around them to hold them up. It had, for quite a little while, but in coming up the runway the pants had slipped down. The priest saw Red's legs and yelled.

"Now!" Jimmie said, throwing the dragon's head off. Red, at the yell, had not waited for the signal. He threw off the hind end of the dragon and kicked his legs out of the pants.

To the soldiers it looked as if the dragon was falling apart at the yell of the priest. They all stared as if under a spell of suspended motion.

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"Come on," Jimmie shouted.

Red kicked at the priest who was closing in, catching him in the stomach. The priest promptly lost all interest in dragons of any kind.

An officer, quicker witted than the men, drew his revolver and fired point blank at Red, hitting him in the chest. Red whirled around, then staggered to the edge and, with Jimmie, jumped from the wall.

CHAPTER XI.

"THE WRECKING WAGON."

IN the making of the wall on that side of the city, or in the repairing, there had been quite a few heavy, large blocks of stone left on the ground close to the wall.

They both, in their jump, just barely cleared several of the blocks that were laid out on a line parallel to the wall. As Jimmie lit, his ankle turned under him. Red lit on his feet, but there was blood coming from his mouth. "Back against the stones," Jimmie ordered. "Red! Roll to the stones! They can't reach us there."

As Jimmie spoke, Red was already rolling over and over to the line of blocks. The angle to the top of the wall did not permit gunfire to reach any one lying flat on the ground against the stones.

"I'm done, Jimmie darlin'," Red said thickly. "Go on. Don't mind me. I'm—I always been wid ye, Jimmie. 'Tis only ye that—"

His voice was drowned out by machine gun fire from the nearest hill. It was long range, but the men at the Brownings had seen and recognized Jimmie and Red through their glasses.

The Boston Bean, the Fighting Yid, Carewe and Grigsby, with tight lips and cold eyes, strutted their stuff, all they had to strut.

The Yid and the Bean made the wall just above Jimmie and Red into a shambles. Grigsby and Carewe started from the middle and cleared the wall on either side for fifty yards. It was a sleet of steel jacketed bullets that nothing could live in.

"Stay with it, Red," Jimmie said, crawling along until he could get an arm under Red's head. "Here comes the wrecking wagon. Hang tough, old kid. It's all over but the shouting."

"'Tis the Yid and the Bean," Red answered wearily. "I know the way them monkey-faced gibboons pull—" Red Dolan temporarily passed out of the picture.

The Yid and the Bean arrived at the same moment, both of them panting from the run. "How is dot for interference?" demanded the Yid as he halted.

"I esk you?" Jimmie answered. "Get to Red. He's badly hurt. Carry us. My ankle's gone south from the way it feels. Where did you get the Tartars?"

"They are the Uryankhes Tartars, Jeems, me good man," answered the Bean. "May I suggest less questioning and more carrying?"

"You may. Get the Tartars back from the wall. There's two or three regiments on the other side."

"They'll come back with us. Stick around until I get some of 'em to pack you and Red. You're too heavy for the Yid and me."

Shellfire was coming now from the parts of the wall beyond machine gun range and the Tartars had found out that they could not climb the wall, so were ready to go back to the hills. There was no attempt made to pursue the rescue party and with Jimmie and

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Red borne on crossed swords, the Yid, the Bean and the Tartars made the hills.

WHEN his officers reported what had happened, Tiensung waved them aside. He had other things more important to occupy his attention than the escape of foreign devils or the profaning of priestly War Dragons. While he was not afraid of the Uryankhes Tartars, he knew what it meant for his city and himself if they got over the walls.

"I will retake the prisoners later," he rather optimistically announced. "Get back to your regiment."

The promises of the Japanese captain who had died, the torture of the two foreign devils and all else but the keeping of the Tartars out of his city, had faded from his mind. But Sahet Khan, despite all his contempt for the Chinese, had too much sense to keep on attacking well-guarded walls.

It was not until later, when the Tartar charge did not materialize, that Tiensung realized that the feint had been made by the Tartars and not at the north wall. Even then he did not order his regiments out of the city. He knew what would happen to them.

That night, in the hills, Sahet Khan listened to the message Jimmie had brought to him. Jimmie had been with Red, who was badly hurt.

"I will hold the Thian Shan for no Chinaman," he said contemptuously. "Not even for the jade hilted sword of Genghis Khan, for which I would give much."

Jimmie, after receiving very efficient first aid from the Yid and the Bean, was feeling much better although still weak. Too weak to argue against a Tartar's absolute contempt for anything Chinese. So he said, "You swore once by the yak tail banner of Genghis Khan, your great ancestor whose fame still rings around the world, that I had released you from a trap, the jaws of which held you close. You swore that whatever I asked, that you would grant if it were in your power. You also went through the ceremony of blood brothership with me."

"I did," Sahet Khan answered. "But, as a blood brother you cannot ask me to hold the hills for a Chinese mongrel. I am a Tartar, blood brother, and so are you since the blooding."

"I know, Sahet Khan, blood brother. This I ask then—hold the hills against all who come from the west—for me, thy blood brother."

"Ho! That I will do gladly. I hold the hills for you against all that come from the west. I swear it on the yak tail banner of Genghis Khan. No matter who comes or what is offered me, I hold for you.

"I do this," Sahet Khan went on, "for you—and not in any way for the jade hilted sword."

Jimmie could see the longing in the fierce, eagle-like eyes of the Tartar. He smiled and answered, "I know that you do it for me, blood brother. The matter is closed. Now—as my blood brother, will you accept a present from me, offered as a token of my love?"

"I will," answered Sahet Khan just as promptly. "What is the present?"

"The jade hilted sword that once your mighty ancestor wore at his side. It is in Hongkong, blood brother. Once I return there, it will be sent you."

IT was a month later when Jimmie Cordie sat once more in the gardens of Yen Yuan. His face was a little pale and he had lost a good deal of weight, but the smile on his lips and

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in his eyes was as ever. "And the doctors have reported that Red is well on the way to recovery, for which the Nine Red Gods be praised. The lord of the flaming hair is a hard man to nurse and keep in bed. So—the Japanese captain is dead, and Sahet Khan holds the Thian Shan for me. I hold for you, second father to me."

"And I," Yen Yuan said blandly, "hold for General Tsai-Ting-Kai. The jade hilted sword is ready for the Tartar, clever one."

"That's fine. He sent some of his sub-khans down with me—and his whole tribe is waiting at the border to escort it home. It's all over and there is no use talking about water under the bridge, but there's one thing that puzzles me. The only way I can figure a leak is through the Mandarin Yang Hui Chieh—and I've always thought that a Manchu noble could not be opened up."

"The Manchu noble was not, as you say, opened up, peerless one who is a son to me. He was trapped by the Nippon captain after leaving here that morning. I missed him and search was made by my little brothers. The Mandarin Yang Hui Chieh was traced easily to a shop in which he had been decoyed by an arranged street fight. The shopkeeper and all near were questioned and after a little persuasion told all they knew.

"Then," Yen Yuan went on, "two men were brought before me. Again, with persuasion, they also told. They were the men who had assisted the Nippon captain in the torture of the Mandarin Yang Hui Chieh. He played a Manchu trick on the little Nippon captain. Resisting torture until the time came, he told a tale that led far away from the truth.

"But in telling it he selected the war lord of Szechuan to name. The gods must have wished to also play, putting that name in his mouth. The Mandarin Yang Hui Chieh did not know that your path neared the war lord of Szechuan."

"Well," Jimmie answered, "I'm glad to know that. Anything else wouldn't sound right to me. I told Red I'd be back in an hour." Jimmie rose and smiled at Yen Yuan. "Any time you have any more messages to deliver—one more thing, mighty one. You knew how the Tartars feel towards the Chinese. Why did you expect that Sahet Khan would hold for a Chinese general—even for the jade hilted sword?"

"I did not expect that he would, brilliant one," answered old Yen Yuan placidly. "That is why I asked you to go instead of sending a T'aip'ing column strong enough to brush all opposition out of their way.

"It came to my mind," Yen Yuan went on, a little smile on his own lips, "that if Sahet Khan would not hold for the Chinese—he might for you. I knew that you would ask him to do so."

Jimmie laughed. "I'll pass the question of how you knew that. I started to say that if you wanted any more messages delivered, don't hesitate to call on me, although I think that as a messenger I'm a darn good trap springer. All I hope is that General Tsai-Ting-Kai will see the light."

"General Tsai-Ting-Kai will see the light," Yen Yuan promised, smoothly.

Before Jimmie Cordie got back to Red, who was at George Grigsby's apartment on the Peak, General Tsai-Ting-Kai must have "seen the light," for his Nineteenth Route army was on the march towards Shanghai.

THE END.

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Tyrant of the Steppes

By JACK ALLMAN

Author of "Boomerang," "Halloway's Debt," etc.

Over the fog-obscured wastes of Siberia Granville Parker flew his plane on a rescue mission—only to crash into startling adventures among a hostile race

CHAPTER I.

CRASHED.

IT was a colorful crowd that thronged Barracks Square that July evening to welcome Granville Parker back to his native Northland. Nome was doing herself proud, and the Alaskan night sun shone down on many who were not of the camp's nine hundred permanent residents.

A big, raw-boned miner from Anvil Creek rubbed elbows with a Lapp reindeer herder from the Lomen brothers' outfit. A buck-toothed squaw, in high French heels and a dizzily patterned dress of curtain material, clung to the arm of a Mission Indian whose gray derby was three sizes too small, and his tan buttoned shoes as much too large. Business men and their wives formed a half circle around the speaker's stand, and back through the crowd were sailors from the big ship anchored in the roadstead beyond the mile wide strip of shallow, sun-kissed water. The "girls" stood back on the fringe; a small group by themselves.

Gran Parker, still wet from the ducking he had received while lightering his crated airplane ashore from the distant steamer, sat at the right of the spokesman for the reception committee and smiled down into the faces of hundreds of friends. His high cheek bones—the gift of his mother, who had

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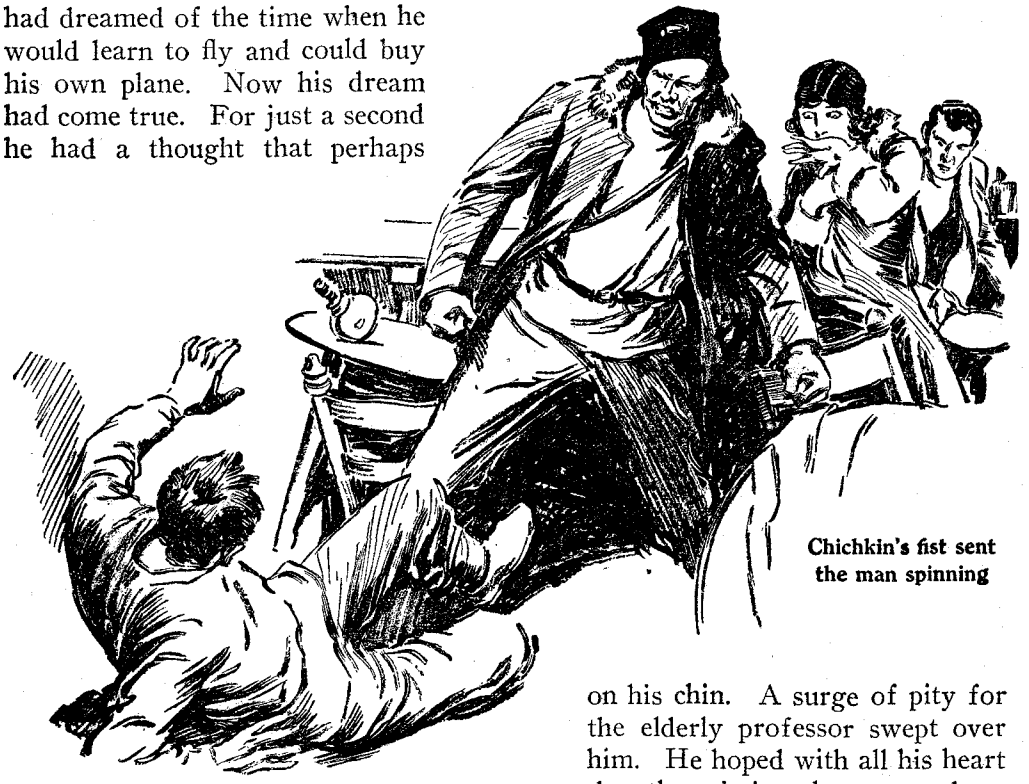
been the daughter of a Norwegian whaler—were touched with a dull red that shone through the healthy tan of his lean face. Beneath the fringe of black hair that lay damply plastered to his forehead, his jet eyes danced.

It was good to be back home again after two years "outside," where concrete sidewalks stove up a man's leg joints, and hotel rooms had only half enough windows. For years he had dreamed of the time when he would learn to fly and could buy his own plane. Now his dream had come true. For just a second he had a thought that perhaps he was still in the land of fancy, and then he smiled to himself. It was all true. He was right here in Barracks Square, where he had been handed the bag of gold, prize money for driving his dogs to victory over the best the world had to offer.

At the thought of that gruelling four-hundred-and-eight-mile race, his leg muscles twitched. They had felt like hot wires when he had stumbled in to win the money that would make his dream a reality. He was back home. His own plane was there on the beach. And adventure—real adventure of the kind that would step any twenty-six-year-old chap's heart up a few beats—lay waiting for him on the morrow.

Gran looked across the platform, to where Professor Barwell sat thoughtfully tugging at the little gray imperial on his chin. A surge of pity for the elderly professor swept over him. He hoped with all his heart that the mission they were about to undertake would prove successful. The speaker held up his hand for silence, and when quiet was restored, he launched into his speech.



Chichkin's fist sent the man spinning

"It isn't at all necessary for me to introduce Granville Parker to you, my friends," he said. "All Nome knows him. All of Seward Peninsula hails him as a friend; and hundreds, yes, thousands, of miles of Alaska's unmapped trails have borne the mark of

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his sled runners and felt the beat of his tireless, moccasin-clad feet."

The speaker, one of the ablest lawyers in the Territory, leaned over and rested his hands on the rail of the hastily constructed stand. He peered down into the ring of faces.

"And it isn't necessary for me to praise him," he continued. "You have cheered him to an echo before this.—When we crowned him King of the Trails, you gathered here on this spot to honor him.

"Some of the trips he has made with his dogs have written Northland history. As I sweep my eyes over you I see faces that would not be here if Gran Parker hadn't driven off into the teeth of a bitter blizzard and carried fresh potatoes into a storm-bound, scurvy-ridden camp, where you were waging a hopeless fight against the poison in your blood." The speaker paused.

A ROUSING cheer rose on the clear, cool air. Here and there grim-lipped men nodded understanding heads. They were the same men who, with blackened gums and swollen joints, had torn Gran's load to pieces like beasts in their eagerness to get at the fresh vegetable that would save their lives.

"Does it surprise you, my friends," continued the speaker, "when I tell you that while we are gathered here to welcome home a son of whom we are justly proud, we can also wish him luck on another errand of mercy? Well, we can, for to-morrow Gran Parker starts on a search for a party of explorers who have not been heard from in two years. He flies his own plane on this trip, and Professor Barwell here, whose son was in charge of the expedition, goes with him." The speaker dropped a hand to the shoulder of the elderly man on his left.

"Most of you are familiar," he said, "with the professor's work, here and across Bering Strait, among the Eskimos. As one of the world's leading anthropologists, he has studied the science of man in all corners of the globe. Proof of his theory that North America was first populated by migration from the Old World was almost within his grasp when the rigors of too many winters in the Arctic knotted his muscles with rheumatism. He left it to his son to carry on the work.

"And now, after two years have passed without word from his son, he has returned from the States to accompany Gran in the search—a trip that will take them up along the Siberian coast, where danger lurks in every changing whim of Nature, where sudden dense fogs sweep in from the Arctic seas, over an uncharted route that only one man has ever attempted to fly. You all know the sad fate of Colonel Ben Eielson, our pioneer flyer. Ben was also on a rescue mission."

The speaker stopped and flung an arm out to the westward. "Men's lives were in danger—that's why Ben flew out over those green waters never to return; and it is for the same reason that Gran Parker is going to attempt this hazardous flight. It isn't for gold that men of their stamp do such things."

He went on to explain how Professor Barwell had met Gran while he was learning to fly, and how they had made their plans to search for the missing party. He told of how twelve years before, in a little cove on the north coast of Alaska, a friendship between the two had been born out of an Arctic tragedy.

He drew a picture of a fourteen-

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year-old boy, running breathless for miles in order to summon help for an injured father; and he told how for two weeks the professor had worked night and day to keep the spark of life aflame in the old trader's breast. He painted the scene of young Gran going out into the world alone, after death had robbed him of his last family tie on this earth.

"Lack of proper food and shelter during those two weeks left their mark on Professor Barwell," said the speaker. "Illness was followed by a breaking down of his rugged strength, until two years ago he turned his work over to his son.

"Gran Parker hasn't forgotten that battle to save his father's life—and tomorrow he goes out to try and find William Barwell." He turned and held his hand out to the older man.

"Professor," he said, "let me wish you success. And allow me to congratulate you upon the choice of your companion."

He turned to Gran, whose six feet two towered above him as the young man got to his feet.

"Gran, the best of luck—the very best. We wish you godspeed, and we hope that the next time you return home you'll stay long enough for us to see something of you." He winced at the unconscious pressure of Parker's grip. The beach and the tundra echoed back the cheering of the crowd.

A HORIZON-LOW midnight sun skimmed the dancing waters of Bering Sea and gilded the wings of Gran's ship with russet gold as he held her nose into the west, thrilling at the steady, unbroken roar of her motor.

From Cape Prince of Wales, the most westerly point of the American mainland, he headed out over the forty miles of sea that separated it from East Cape, Siberia.

Ahead, and to the left, were the tiny brown dots that were the Diomedes Islands, sticking their foam-wreathed heads up in the middle of Bering Strait, like stepping stones between the two hemispheres.

Soon they were over the headland of the Old World. Gran swung up toward Cape Unikin. The sun was on the rise now, a little to their right, but a veil of clouds turned the gold of its face to platinum.

"It was along about here some place that Eielson crashed," said Gran through the Gosport speaking tube as he pointed down to the rugged coast, five thousand feet below them.

The professor nodded.

Cape Serd fell to the rear, and then Cape Nord. They were making good time, but Gran threw a wary eye on the thickening clouds far ahead. He checked up on the fuel and the mileage covered. Fine! They would land at Kolyma with some to spare. And it was from Kolyma that those vague reports of an ice-crushed ship had been relayed to Nome, through independent Siberian traders.

With the picking up of those few tangled threads of information had gone Gran's last hope of ever dissuading the professor from making the perilous trip.

"Well," he figured now as they sailed along, "age doesn't make much difference when you have the sky for a trail."

A momentary rift in the clouds, and the floating ice pans sent off flashes of varicolored fire. Black spots dotted some of them, and Gran knew that walruses were basking in the brief kiss of the sun.

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A low, dim shape sped past on the sea horizon to the right. Wrangell Island! For long minutes it held their attention. Both knew the history of the expedition which Vilhjalmur Stefansson had sent to this bleak rock in the Arctic Sea, and Gran had had the story of the Wrangell Island tragedy from the lips of Ada Blackjack herself. The Eskimo woman who had been taken along to make the skin clothing for the explorers had survived them all, keeping herself alive on fox meat. She alone was left when, after two "tight" seasons, a ship had managed to force a path through the ice to pick up the marooned party.

She had told him that Lorne Knight, the last to die, had sat for days looking off into the south for the rescue ship that never came. The scurvy poison in his blood had not once dampened his hope, and he spent his last hours in the hut whose door opened to the south.

Gran believed he could guess pretty well what was running through the worried mind of the man in the front cock-pit. Professor Barwell would be wondering if his only son might not be waiting somewhere up here in the frozen wastes. He was looking off into the south with hopes of rescue in his heart.

DRAGGING his gaze back from the desolate island, Gran let a frown crease his forehead, beneath the leather helmet. A thick fog was rolling up from the floe-dotted water between the shore and the ice blink. The professor saw it, too, and he turned troubled eyes to Gran.

A great segment of the coast was already blotted out, and the fog was getting larger every minute. To continue on would be to invite disaster. To land would be difficult.

Gran dove for a hole in the billowing mass. It closed before he got down to a thousand feet. The brown of the earth below was erased with what seemed to be an endless swirl of carded wool. He pulled the nose of his ship up.

The fog was so thick that water began to stream from the edges of his wings; and then, all at once, they were in one of those bitter winds that can change Arctic temperature ten degrees in as many minutes. Ice began to form on the wires, struts and wing surfaces.

Gran nosed her up so steeply that his seat became "hard." The ice formed more quickly as he increased his altitude. He could feel the weight of it on the sluggish response to the stick. She refused to climb higher.

He put her down again, rapidly, and scanned the terrain below. He'd have to land. His troubled eyes picked out a crescent of beach, and he swung low over it.

The fog was thick, but as he dragged the comparatively level shoreline, at a height of about twenty feet, he saw that there were no bowlders against which to crack up. He swung around and came in on a long glide.

No sooner had his wheels touched than his hands seemed to do a dozen things at once. He had been fooled. What had looked like sand and light gravel was dirty honeycombed ice that had been forced up onto the beach by tide-driven floes.

As the long, edgewise crystals of rotten ice flew from the impact of his undercarriage, he cut his switch to prevent fire. His goggles were yanked from his head with one hand, while the other dragged back on the stick to hold her tail down.

There was the snap of breaking

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spruce; the tearing rip of dope-stiffened fabric. For a moment the ship stood on her nose, and then she rolled over onto her back.

GRAN clawed his way out from under the padded coaming of the cock-pit and wiped away the blood that streamed from a cut over one eye. Groggily, he staggered around, trying to collect his senses. A low groan reached his ears, and he snapped into action.

As soon as he had dragged the professor out, Gran looked closely into his face. He plastered an ear to the older man's chest, and his strong fingers felt lightly of one limp wrist. He shook his head at the gurgling sound in Barwell's throat, and with his handkerchief wiped away the two dark streaks that ran from the corners of his mouth to the neatly trimmed imperial.

"Hurt internally!" he told himself.

Stripped of his heavy flying suit, Gran worked with feverish haste. From behind his own seat he took out their emergency outfit. He had to rip the fabric to get to them, but within a few minutes he had the little silk tent properly erected on the beach above the ice.

He wrapped the professor in their two blankets, and placed him on a hurriedly gathered bed of reindeer moss. The older man groaned just once. There were hard lines around Gran's mouth as he pumped air into the little primus stove. There was nothing he could do to ease the professor's suffering, and his helplessness tormented him.

He picked up the rifle, stuffed some shells into his pocket, and struck off along the beach. Because of the thick fog he could not see far, but the grinding of loose ice told him by what a narrow margin they had missed coming down in the sea.

AN eider duck had been simmering in the pot for twelve hours before the professor returned to painful consciousness. Gran forced him to sip some of the rich broth.

"It's my chest," said the injured man. "Crushed— It hurts like—the very devil just to breathe." Bravely he compressed his lips to smother an involuntary moan.

Gran heated more hot rocks and placed them in the blankets to keep him warm. After an hour or so, during which time Gran had forced him to rest and not talk, the professor's breathing became a series of wheezy gasps. He motioned Gran to his side.

"It's but a matter of minutes," he said in a croaking whisper. "This suffering—will soon be over." He placed a white hand on the thigh nearest the reindeer moss bed, and looked at Gran with eyes that were brave, though filled with pain.

"I'm sorry to have—gotten you into a jam like this," he said. "Take my money belt.—It will help replace your —plane when you get back." With a shaking hand he wiped away the beads of perspiration that were gathering around his eyes.

"I'll continue on to Kolyma first," promised Gran. "Perhaps I can get a line on William. That is, if there was anything to the report of those traders who exchanged your money."

A bright, almost happy light filled the old professor's eyes. He actually smiled through the pain-twisted muscles of his face. When he spoke his voice was but a bubbly whisper.

"Thanks—Gran." A fit of coughing interrupted him. "God bless you!" he breathed, and then his voice failed. He

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tried to raise an arm, but it fell back weakly.

Death came as a merciful relief from the terrible suffering.

With a tightened throat Gran crept out of the tent and cursed the swirling fog. He looked at the plane, and again told himself that the fault was not his. No wheel could have been expected to roll far on such a surface. The roar of tumbling ice pans in the near-by surf sent a shiver through him.

CHAPTER II.

THE ISPRAVNIK.

THE next afternoon, in a bright sunshine that had dispelled the fog, Gran took a last look at the rocky crypt that contained the professor's body.

He looked off into the west. Kolyma! In the neighborhood of a hundred miles, he guessed. Something that Robert Service had once written flashed through his mind: "A promise made, is a debt unpaid."—And that promise had eased the professor's last moments. Gran swung a light pack to his shoulders, picked up his rifle, and struck off.

Skua gulls and murres shrieked their fear as he frightened them from their rookeries along the cliffs. A polar bear with a yearling cub at her flank stared for a moment at him with tiny black eyes and twitching black nose. Then she streaked off down the beach. As he cut across the base of a long point, a herd of caribou quit their feeding to watch him pass. But Gran paid not the least attention to the life around him. It was all too familiar.

From all appearances, he might have been mushing along the coast of his native Alaska, instead of driving himself along the Arctic shores of Asia.

He skirted ice-filled bights of the sea; cut across long stretches of tundra, where he could trace the shoreline ahead; but kept straight on, into the face of the dipping August sun.

Once, he passed a deserted hut of stones and beach clay. Near by was a well defined ring. A skin tent had been recently pitched there.

"Getting close to where I might expect to meet some one," he mused.

The next morning he stopped on top of a low ridge, with a racing heart. There, below and a short distance ahead, lay what had been a boat. Against the whitish gray of the pressure-ridden shore ice, he could see a number of dark figures moving about. *Men!* He trotted down the slope; and before he was within fifty yards, he read the name of young Barwell's ship across the crushed and shattered stern.

So the traders had had the right dope! The ship had been crushed on the shore. Gran's heart leaped. That must mean that the crew had saved themselves.

A man scrambled down from among the broken timbers of the splintered iron-bark sides. They met at the edge of the jumbled ice cakes, and Gran saw that the man's blue eyes were riveted to his leather flying helmet.

Gran greeted the man in rusty Russian, and the man answered him in kind; but his next words were in English, much to Gran's surprise. Then he realized that from his clothes the man from the boat could easily have told that he was a flyer who had dropped down out of the skies.

"AMERICAN?" asked the man, after repeating his salutation in English. Four children crowded around him.

"Right," replied Gran. He told how

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he happened to be there, and asked the man if he had been one of the crew of the ill-fated Search.

"Nope! I live in Kolyma in the winter, and out here along the coast in summer," he explained.

He went on to tell how he had been the only member of a whaler crew to survive a wreck and a winter of scurvy. Ericson, he said his name was, and he had married a native woman, had four children and no desire to return to the United States.

"Before my parents came to America, I was raised on Varanger Fiord, among the Lapps in northern Norway. It was a whole lot like this country—I like it."

"When was the Search wrecked?" asked Gran. "And what became of her crew?"

"Don't know the exact time," replied Ericson. "There was nobody here on this stretch of coast at the time—'bout two months ago, though. Ship was frozen in the pack which broke up early this year. There were tide cracks and open leads all winter, and a westerly current here took the ice out into Nordenskiold Sea. When the pack came down under the influence of a north wind, she was crushed and shoved up here on the beach."

"And the crew?" prompted Gran, eagerly.

Ericson shook his head slowly. "Lot of stories floating around 'bout them," he said. "There was eight of 'em that came into Kolyma. Seems a couple had died during that year they were in the ice."

"What became of those eight? Was there a tall fellow about my build? Sort of reddish hair—perhaps beard, too?"

"Yeah, that sounds like the leader. Him and seven others went into Kolyma, where they bought some deer and tried to hire herders to make a trip to East Cape or Okhotsk. They were buying reindeer for both sled and pack, and paying for 'em with gold dust—mostly large nuggets. That's what got 'em in bad."

"Got them in bad?" Gran's head snapped up from the cigarette he was rolling.

"Yeah, the *ispravnik* heard about it and confiscated their gold."

Gran's brows knit as he licked his cigarette. "I thought they had done away with Provincial Governors since the revolution," he said.

"They have," explained Ericson. "They call themselves Chairmen of the *Oblast-Soviet,* but the term *ispravnik* is still used by the natives and old timers. By the way, you talk as though you'd been over here before. You spoke to me in Russian."

"Pretty rusty, though," said Gran. "Used to handle it fairly well when I was a kid on my dad's trading vessel making the coast from Petropaviovsk to Anadir . . . that was years ago, though. Anyway, what right did this bird have to confiscate the gold?"

"What right?" The expatriated whaler grinned. "Hell, fellow," he said, "This Mikheal Chichkin is worse than any *ispravnik* that ever ruled a province in Siberia during the reign of the Czars. Funny you didn't meet him; he went past here yesterday with four soldiers and six pack deer. He'll be coming back this evening, I guess—collecting taxes."

"I didn't follow the coast all the way," said Gran. "Now, what about this confiscating the gold? And where did the eight survivors of the Search go?"

"Well, I don't know anything for sure. Nobody seems to, but I heard that

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this leader of the outfit—the fellow you call Barwell—put up a holler. Said that the gold hadn't been mined in Russian territory, but had come from an island they had discovered while fast in the ice. That was probably a lie, but it didn't do him any good, anyway. I heard that they were all slapped in jail."

"In Kolyma? Is that where this Chichkin hangs out?"

"Yeah, he handles the fur trade for the Central Government. If they're in jail, Kolyma's just where they'd be, all right."

"Hard guy to do business with, eh?"

"I'll say. They tell me he was even too blood-thirsty for Moscow; that's why they sent him up here. Mad Mikheal they call him—behind his back, of course!"

GRAN helped Ericson carry the few scraps of iron and copper that he had been salvaging from the wreck around the point to his tent.

"The *ispravnik* came down and cleaned her out as soon as he heard she was on the beach," Ericson explained, "but she was so badly crushed that some of the stuff was covered with splintered timbers and ice. I managed to get a few things off her. That's my *yaranga* there in the cove. Come on in and have *chy-peet.*"

Gran thought a moment and then laughed. "'A fill of tea'! Gee whiz," he said. "it's been years since I've heard that." They entered the two-roomed tent of tanned deer skins.

Ericson introduced his wife, and Gran could tell by the tattooing on her face that the woman whom the ex-whaler had married was a Yakoghire—a member of that tribe whose men are deer breeders and who range from the Stanovoi Mountains north to the ocean. From the size of her *labrets*—those pieces of stone, like huge collar buttons, set through incisions in her lower lip—he figured that she might be the daughter of a chieftain.

While they were sipping their tea and picking at a dish of dried fish, Gran asked a hundred questions. The answers were bewildering in their variety. About certain points that Gran brought up, Ericson had sometimes heard as many as five different versions, rumors which reached him throught the natives.

Regarding the question as to whether the eight men were still in jail, or had ever been confined there, he had heard that they had been taken to Moscow for trial. He had also heard that there was no truth to the story that they had even been arrested. And again, it had been noised around that five of the party had been executed—probably because they had attempted escape.

"If you are still determined to go on into Kolyma and investigate," cautioned Ericson, "stay clear of Mad Mikheal. He's bad medicine—especially when it comes to dealing with foreigners."

"I don't see how I can very well stay away from him, if I'm going to find out the facts about Barwell," said Gran.

He nibbled at another piece of the *ukale,* and was just about ready to continue on his journey, when loud shouts up the beach reached their ears.

"That must be him on the way back now," exclaimed Ericson. "Here's where I get my eye teeth taken out for taxes," he said. He pointed to the flap covering the entrance of the sleeping quarters. "Get in there!" he whispered. "Get under the robes next to the wall and stay put. Here! Take your rifle and pack in with you—and don't dare show yourself till they're

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gone." He half shoved Gran through the small opening.

OUTSIDE, the shouts of the deer drivers were getting louder. Gran could hear the cluck of the cloven hoofs on the beach gravel. He stretched out next to the wall, and drew a polar bear robe over himself just as a bellowing voice called the caravan to a halt.

He heard Ericson deferentially return a gruff order with a softly spoken, "Yes, *barin.*"

Gran wriggled around to where he could glue his eye to a small rip in the seams of the skins. Only one of the deer, with its pack, was visible, but he could see the four soldiers. Three of them stood at attention, with the butts of their antiquated rifles at the toes of their heavy boots.

Somehow they looked different from the soldiers he remembered as a lad. Probably, he figured, because of the coarse cheapness of their uniforms, and the fact that they carried no ornamentation except the traditional string of "thimble" loops across each breast.

However, they wore the same dirty gray sheepskin *papahas* as the troops he had seen at Anadir, and their flat, Tartaric faces were just as mean looking as those of the others had been.

The fourth soldier was spreading out Ericson's furs at the feet of a tall, angular man in civilian clothes.

The *ispravnik!* Mad Mikheal!

Gran studied the cruel, fleshless face from his hiding place. He noted the thin, bloodless lips; the deep-set, flashing black eyes; the thin, beak-like nose.

On widespread legs, with his hands on his hips, the man looked down at the beautiful array of skins. In the V of his opened coat, Gran could see the high-collared red shirt. From a strap across his shoulders there hung a holstered gun, and from one hand trailed the black coils of a leather lash. As he bent over, the more closely to examine the furs, Gran saw that the top of his black astrakhan cap was a circle of scarlet with a design in gold braid.

The man straightened up with a beautiful fawn-colored fox skin. The pelt looked as though it might have been taken from an animal which was a cross between a Kamchatka and a white arctic, thought Gran, as he admired the unique pelt. The *ispravnik* blew his breath into the soft fur and rubbed it back with the stock of his whip.

His black eyes twinkled greedily as he put it aside and added eight pure white ones. He said something to the man who had spread out the roll, and the soldier pulled a book from the pocket of his blouse.

Ericson's back was to Gran, but he could see the sudden tightening of muscles and the angry toss of his head. The ex-whaler pointed a finger to the pile.

"For which tax?" he asked.

"Provincial," barked the ispravnik, without even looking up from the other furs. The soldier started to write something in his book.

"The provincial tax is only ten whites, or their value," protested Ericson. "The freak skin is worth many of them."

The soldier's pencil hesitated.

"I say it's worth two, do I not?" Mad Mikheal's Russian was difficult for Gran, but he managed to get enough to see what the man was doing. The unique skin was indeed far more valuable than twenty of the common whites.

"But, *barin* . . ."

"I said it was worth two!" The

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voice was harsh and carried a rasping note of finality. "Your ermines!"

Ericson shrugged his shoulders helplessly. He dragged another bundle out through the door of the tent.

"How many children has he?" asked the *ispravnik* of the soldier, who informed him that there were five.

"You know, *barin*, we lost the youngest last fall; there are only four now," explained Ericson.

"The book says five," snapped Chichkin. "Five children, yourself and wife—seven times fifty—three hundred and fifty ermine skins." The soldier began to count out the tiny white pelts by the number of black tipped tails in each small bundle.

Gran could see the cords standing out on his host's neck as he protested heatedly.

"I thought they were going to abolish the church tax, since they've abolished the church itself," he said.

Chichkin wheeled around and said something, but the words came too rapidly for Gran's meager and rusty knowledge of the tongue. He could see the side of Ericson's face now, and he saw the blood drain swiftly from his cheek. Gran was unable to hear what he said through clenched teeth, but the American admired his host's courage in putting up an argument with the man who was judge, jury, executioner and king of the province.

He saw the hastily raised hand. Heard the dull thud of the whipstock as it smacked against Ericson's face.

"I'd take one good poke at that bozo if he ever tried that on me," Gran muttered. He saw Ericson bow his head and stand motionless before Mad Mikheal, and he fought back the angry surge that brought his teeth together with a click and made the blood beat hard in his temples.

"So this is the baby I have to see, is it?" he thought. "Nice prospect!"

THE caravan of deer, Samoyed drivers, soldiers and the *ispravnik* had not yet passed around the point before Gran was out offering Ericson his sympathy. The man fingered the red welt across his cheek.

"Some day I'll kill that so-and-so," he gritted. "Every year he gets worse.—That fox was worth real money."

"Why didn't you hide it? Why show it to him?"

"What good would that do? What we don't give up in taxes have to be sold to him at first snowfall. No trade ships ever get up here any more—not since the Central Government found out there was money in stealing furs.

"It isn't so much the money," he continued. "I'm wealthy. My wife's dowry was a thousand deer—don't forget that I'm a white man—and I've increased that to three thousand. As I say, it isn't the money, it's the principle. Why, my furs are nothing but a by-product. My herders also run a line of traps, and that costs me nothing."

"Well, he sure acts like a tough customer," said Gran. "Perhaps it was a good idea, when you shoved me out of sight. But sooner or later I'll have to brace him if I want the straight dope on Barwell. I hope he hasn't got a sour stomach the day he gives me an audience!"

"If I were you," advised Ericson seriously, "I wouldn't go straight to him. He's death on foreigners, and if there's any truth in these rumors flying around, he'll trump up a charge to slam you in the cooler—keep you from getting out of the country and reporting. Got a passport?"

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"Hell, no! My old man made the trip over every year, and he never needed one."

"Well, everything is red tape and permits now," explained Ericson. "He might toss you into the jug for being in the country illegally. Any old excuse will do for him—and just try and get out of one of these Siberian jails!"

"Nice picture you're painting!" grinned Gran, but Ericson didn't answer. He was sizing the young aviator up with an appraising eye.

"You say your mother was Norwegian," he remarked. "Well, you look more like a south Siberian than some of them do themselves. Why don't you try passing off for one?—You'll get a lot further than you will as an American. He's death on foreigners. Though I like the country, I wouldn't be here ten minutes if it wasn't that I'm married to a native woman—and am a heavy tax payer. Why, the deer I turn over to him every fall would make you weep."

GRAN smiled. "So I look like a Mongol, do I?"

"Hell, no," said Ericson. "Some of those birds from down in the Stanovoi region haven't a bit of slant to their eyes. You'd pass for one of them easily—and it 'll help you on account of the language, too. Some of them speak a little Russky—but damned few of them."

"Might be a good idea at that," agreed Gran. "You know more about the situation than I do."

"Come on and I'll fix you up," motioned the ex-whaler, leading the way to a cache in one of the rock caves under the bluff.

There he rummaged around through coils of rope, cable, casks of fuel and other salvage from the boat. Gran seated himself on a small square wooden case, while Ericson searched.

When the Norwegian found what he was after, Gran got to his feet. As he did so the top slipped from the case.

"Holy Moses!" he gasped. "Look what I was sitting on!"

"What the devil is that junk?" asked Ericson. "I found it under some other stuff in the hold, and I dragged it up here."

"Guncotton!" said Gran.

"Guncotton?"

"Sure! My dad used to have it with him all the time. Used it to blow up the ice and relieve the pressure whenever his boat was getting a squeeze."

"Humph!" grunted Ericson with a sidelong glance at the case. "Nice stuff to play with. Here, see if you can get into these." He held up a suit of coarse homespun.

CHAPTER III.

"GAY-PAY-OO."

AN hour later Gran looked like a different man. His black hair had been combed down over his forehead, and Ericson had cut it straight across, from temple to temple, in bangs. It changed the whole contour of his face. A cap of mangy arctic hare covered his head, and his feet were incased in strong boots of hair seal.

"Get by any place!" said Ericson. "You look like hundreds of those East Siberians that I've seen in Kolyma. They are Russian, but they have banded together in half wild tribes. They are treated like the whites, though. Not like the natives."

Gran offered to pay, but Ericson waved the idea aside. "What! From a fellow American?" He snorted and stuck out his hand. "Remember what

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I've told you," he warned. "Keep your gun out of sight and your real mission a secret."

"And keep out of this Chichkin's way," supplied Gran with a grin.

"I'll say! If Mad Mikheal ever gets the hunch that you're an American, he will find out why you're here by putting you through one of the toughest third degrees that you ever heard of. If he's confiscated gold that rightfully belonged to this fellow Barwell, or if he's done away with any of the outfit, you will never get out to report it. And that's a cinch."

They shook hands, and Gran thanked him for all his help and his tips. He picked up his rifle, and with a final good-by, struck off along the well marked trail of the caravan.

As the route led up over the bluffs at the base of a point, Gran saw a part of Ericson's herd. For miles the reddish-brown backs made a slowly undulating sea of the vast tundra. The ex-whaler was indeed wealthy.

"Strange duck," thought Gran, as he pictured the primitive life that Ericson chose to lead.

ONCE or twice, he caught glimpses of the *ispravnik's* outfit ahead, but it was not until they had stopped to collect more taxes from a native family on the beach that Gran came up to them.

He mushed right on past, and nothing more than a casual glance was thrown his way. He was elated to think that he had successfully passed himself off as a native Siberian. A few miles further on, he topped a slight rise. He stopped and looked off at the silver ribbon that was the Kolyma river.

The settlement, the Mecca of the north coast fur trade, was strung along one bank. The rude houses, erected from logs floated down from the timbered regions above, all had huge chimneys rising from one corner of the roof. Plumes of smoke rose straight up in the still, clear air.

Gran followed the well-trodden deer trail into the town; and when he came to what he figured to be the main thoroughfare, he stopped and leaned against a low, rambling log warehouse.

It would be best to feel his way along carefully, he figured, and he sized things up with a cautious eye. A short distance above where he stood, the street led into a large muddy square. The most imposing structure in the town faced this square, and he guessed it was probably the *ispravnik's* house.

As he sized it up, he saw a couple of squads of soldiers emerge from a long, low barracks building. They fell into formation under the orders of an officer, and then marched off. Changing the guard, mused Gran.

Down the street a short distance was another large building which seemed to be the center of attraction for those coming from all directions. People were going in and coming out, and in front of it a group of soldiers stood chatting.

"I'll look that place over first," Gran told himself, and drew back into the shadow of the warehouse as Chichkin's caravan swung into the street.

As soon as they were out of sight at a corner of the square, he stepped out and turned toward the crowd in front of the building below. Just then a woman with a gaily colored shawl over her head and a basket of fish under her arm passed him. Her eyes rested curiously on the gun in his hands.

Gran decided that he'd better hide his rifle; and as soon as she turned the corner, he slipped it down into a crack

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between the base of an old handmade fur press and the wall of the building.

HE strolled down the two pieces of split log that formed the sidewalk, and stopped near the only signs of activity on the street. He loitered near the spot where the soldiers were standing and listened to their conversation, but he could only get a few words here and there. He heard enough, though, to learn that today was one of the big *prasniks* of the year. He smiled to himself.

No church, and yet they collected church taxes! No church, and here they were celebrating a religious holiday! The great experiment!—Bah! He'd be satisfied with the government that Washington handed out to Alaska.

He waited until a group of four men arrived, and as they opened the door he could see that the structure was some kind of a public house. He followed them in.

Wild, gypsy-like music that he had heard softly through the log walls now sounded its reckless tempo loudly in his ears.

To the accompaniment of *balalaikas* and an accordion-like instrument, in the hands of a group of gaily dressed men, a young girl sang to an admiring circle of soldiers.

One of them picked her up and interrupted the song with a kiss. Then they did a swift folk dance. The crowded room roared and clapped its hands. Other girls danced with any one who asked them and the musicians seemed never to tire.

The bright colors of the girls' dresses, the wild music, and the gypsy-like abandon of the dancing gave a festive air to the place. Gran seated himself at one of the rough tables along the wall.

A girl, not quite as pretty, and more plainly dressed than the dancers, came for his order. She welcomed him as "comrade." It jolted Gran till he happened to recall that it was the accepted form of address among the soviets. Vaguely, he wondered at Ericson's use of *barin*—the respectful "sir" of the old régime. When he ordered his glass of *vodka* he called the girl comrade, and treated her to a smile. She returned it with interest, and went off to fill his order.

Gran rolled a cigarette, carefully concealing the fact that his tobacco was packed in a familiar American bag, and through the smoke looked the lively crowd over. He sipped his drink slowly. He listened. He watched. A sour look from the proprietor of the place prompted him to order some cucumbers and smoked sturgeon. Fearing to drink much of the powerful *vodka*, he asked for sour beer this time.

"Not so different from the States in that respect," he mused. "If you want to sit around—keep buying."

He took his time with his food, and his thoughts wandered to the problem that faced him. Was young Barwell a prisoner somewhere here in this isolated settlement? Or was he dead?

He wondered what chance he would have of finding out. He listened to conversations around him, but nothing except the gayety of the people enjoying their fête came to him.

He had hardly expected that he would learn anything so soon. "It'll take time to get a line on things," he reasoned; but he was mistaken . . .

BEFORE he had finished nibbling at his sturgeon and cucumbers a different crowd started coming. There were some bearded Russians with soft, fat hands—and soft, fat

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wives. They threw money to the musicians, thereby commanding the attention of the proprietor. Business men and government officials, guessed Gran.

Unaccustomed as he was to the social order of things in this far flung Soviet outpost, he watched everything through amused eyes. He marvelled at the changed order that made it possible for wealth and poverty to mix in the town's one place of entertainment.

He was wondering just what the result of this national upheaval would be when his attention was drawn to the entrance. With an obsequious bow, the fat little owner was welcoming Mikheal Chichkin, the *ispravnik* who stood just inside the doorway, with a beautiful lady on his arm.

Business men rose from their chairs as Mad Mikheal and his companion were led to a special table near the musicians. It was *barin* here, and *barin* there; and Chichkin seemed to be enjoying the awed respect in which he was held. Evidently, thought Gran, he isn't so much of a Communist but that he considers himself above the herd.

Mad Mikheal seated himself first, and ran his black, deep-set eyes over the crowded room. He gave no thought to the woman's comfort.

Gran felt a little tingle in his blood as his eyes met those of the other man. Then he turned his gaze to the woman. She was, he thought, the most beautiful creature that he had ever seen.

Her hair, so black that it looked blue, was parted in the middle and drawn tightly down on each side, to cover all except the pink lobes of her ears, and it formed a lustrous *chignon* at the nape of her neck.

She threw back a wrap of thistle green, with a rich silver fox collar, and Gran admired the soft whiteness of her throat. Slowly she drew white gloves from her hands, and he saw that her fingers were bare of rings.

"She doesn't need jewels," he told himself. "She's perfect just as she is."

Beneath the table he could see her tiny feet, with the light wool skirt meeting the tops of her embroidered boots at mid-calf. He guessed her age at twenty-two or twenty-three; and her figure, he noted, was beautifully slender and shapely.

"And with that old tyrant!" he mused. "Why, he must be around forty."

CHICHKIN requested—or perhaps commanded—certain airs to be played by the orchestra, and the gayety of the room returned. Gran had a hard time not to stare rudely at the woman, and he picked at his sturgeon with wild thoughts running through his mind.

"I'd like to meet some one like her some time," he muttered to himself.

The dancing and singing continued, with all the frenzy that *vodka* can put into the soul of people who are pleasure bent. Mad Mikheal sat back in his chair and surveyed the happy crowd like a king watching his subjects at play. Every once in a while he pounded the table with his big fist and bellowed orders to the girl before she could reach his side. He held a cucumber in his hand like a child would a stick of candy, and he tore pieces from it with jerks of his ponderous head.

Gran saw that the *ispravnik,* in respectable clothes now, and with an attractive companion, was not much different from the collector of taxes whom he had observed through the rent in Ericson's tent that noon. He had the arrogant bearing of an authority who is in the habit of being obeyed,

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but he was as coarse and uncouth as a *mujik*, and the woman seemed to ignore his ill-mannered pounding of the table and his raspy shouts. Once he saw her smile in approval as Chichkin bellowed for a certain song.

There was something, though, about her pearly-toothed smile that puzzled Gran for a moment, and then he remembered. It was like the smiles he had seen on the painted faces of gold diggers leading their male escorts around Frisco's gilded cafés.

Yet Gran would have been willing to wager that this woman wasn't a gold digger; nor, for that matter did she seem to be Chichkin's kind, either. She had an unmistakable air of breeding about her, and there was a touch of sadness behind that mask of gayety.

"I guess women are alike all over the world," Gran philosophized. "Drawn to money and power like iron filings to a magnet."

CHICHKIN was once more pounding for service, and Gran saw that the woman had made her small liqueur last out her companion's four or five *vodkas*.

As Gran watched the clenched fist pounding the table, his mind came back to his reason for being here in this out-of-the-way place.—What power in that strong hand! What cruelty controlled the power in the brain behind those flashing, liquor-bright eyes! Had that hand fallen as a signal to send bullets crashing through the breasts of William Barwell and his companions? Or had it signed the paper that robbed them of their freedom? Would it some day put the official sanction to Gran's own death warrant? Gran asked himself this last question, knowing that if he failed to find out anything by keeping under cover, he would have to go to Bad Mikheal with his case. "A promise made is a debt unpaid—" Before him came the pleading look in Professor Barwell's brave, blue eyes, and Gran shook his head to clear his mind.

As he glanced at the near-by table, he saw that the woman had placed a hand on Chichkin's arm to still the imperative fist. They were arguing about something, and Gran could see that the man's face was flushed from anger as well as *vodka*.

The woman's voice was too soft for him to hear, but when Chichkin bellowed, heads came up all over the room. It seemed that the *ispravnik* didn't give a damn what the people thought about his getting drunk. It was none of their business. "Let the swine think what they wish!" he said. He was in an ugly mood, and he threw her hand from his arm with an angry gesture.

For the first time, Gran saw a tall, rather intelligent looking fellow seated alone at a table crowded into a corner by the musician's stand. He was watching Mad Mikheal intently, and something of quiet strength about his attitude attracted Gran's attention.

The man was dressed in neater blouse and trousers than his neighbors, with a bold tilt to his cap. He looked as if he might hail from European Russia; and when he opened his lips to insert a cigarette there was the glint of a gold tooth. He was leaning far over the table, for his chair was hidden from that of the *ispravnik*.

The argument continued for a couple of moments, and then the woman drew the silver fox up close around her throat and rose from her chair. Chichkin jumped up and grasped her by the wrist. For the fraction of a second there was a flame of wrath in the woman's eyes; and then one of the dancers, a fellow with long mustaches

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and a graying beard, stumbled and almost fell between the two.

QUICK as a flash, Chichkin's fist shot out and knocked the man spinning. He drew back a heavily booted foot to kick the man in the face. A quick look of disgust flashed over the woman's features. She tugged at her escort's arm and said something.

Chichkin kicked the man in the mouth, and wheeled on the woman.

"This is my business, not yours!" he shouted, raising a fist above his head.

The threatening gesture brought Gran half up from his bench. "You dirty rat!" he said impulsively, in English, and the words were hardly out of his mouth when he realized what he had done.

Chichkin evidently didn't hear the angry exclamation, but the woman turned suddenly—like one who hears his name called unexpectedly. Her wide, dark eyes held Gran's. The utmost surprise was written on her face. Then she looked up at her drunken escort and smilingly persuaded him to leave.

The man on the floor half rose and shook a bony fist at the door—after it had closed behind the two. The man with the gold tooth was passing out at the time, and grinned at the gesture. He stepped outside less than a minute behind Chichkin and his lady.

For a moment, Gran almost expected the *ispravnik* to come barging back in. Surely the woman must have understood what he said, else why would she have looked like that? The mere fact that he had spoken in a strange tongue couldn't have caused her surprise. There were a dozen dialects spoken by those who came and traded at Kolyma. No, she must have understood.

Yet where had she learned English? She was typically Russian. His eyes were glued to the door. If she told Chichkin that there was an American in the café, he'd guess the reason and have him arrested immediately.

The music had struck up again; and when Gran turned back to his seat a minute later, the man who had been knocked down was forgotten by the merrymakers. The man wiped the sleeve of his black blouse across his bleeding lips, and slid along the bench to give Gran room. A drop of blood fell from the point of his beard as he bored the door with his angry eyes and mumbled to himself.

He ordered a drink of fermented yak milk, sipped it and turned to Gran. He was not so much mortified by having been knocked down, but he was plenty angry, and just a little drunk. He thumped his chest as he spoke.

"Me! Me! Gurl Borka!—Who does Mikheal Chichkin think he is that he can kick me? May the winds of the steppes wither his soul!"

GRAN, studiously trying to catch every word, and getting enough to understand the meaning, nodded encouragingly for the man to go ahead. The fellow was the first to speak to him, and Gran knew that one could never guess what might come out of an angry man's mouth—especially if he had been drinking.

He noticed that the man had forgone the salutation of comrade, and guessed that he probably held a grudge against the present government. From his tone and attitude, he was more than likely a "White"—a loyal member of the old czarist régime.

When his new table companion asked Gran where he was from, the American welcomed the question. He explained

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that he was from far to the East, which was no lie. He explained that where he came from they had their own dialect, and he apologized for his stumbling Russian. On the chance that his first surmise about the man was correct he made it a point to bring out the fact that his people had not yet felt the hand of the new government.

"We're so isolated, and so poor, that Moscow shows no interest in us," he said.

"And that is fortune in good measure!" breathed Gurl Borka, sipping at his yak milk. "You don't have to be kicked by Ruthenian swine like Mikheal Chichkin." He thumped his chest again and turned blazing eyes to Gran, but his voice was lowered to fit his ears only.

"Me! Gurl Borka! I have been more than he will ever be. I am pure Kirghiz-Kasak. I was a soldier before he was born—helped run the Turks from his province."

He looked about cautiously, and then leaned over in drunken confidence. "You do not believe it?—Look!" He opened the front of his black blouse, and Gran saw two medals that were suspended from frayed ribbons attached to the fellow's underwear. Gran nodded that he understood.

"The crosses of Vladimir and Stanislaus!" whispered the Cossack. "Our family were a family of soldiers—fighters—officers. The Little Father recognized us as such. And now I, Gurl Borka, must work as a servant for an animal like Mikheal Chichkin." He swore bitterly beneath his breath.

GRAN tried not to show his sudden interest. He waited a moment, and then said, casually:

"You are a servant in his household?"

"Slave is a better word! We prisoners are as the serfs which were sold with the land in the time of our grandfathers."

Gran permitted his face to register surprise, and it wasn't faked, either. Here, indeed, was luck.

"You are a prisoner of the Soviet government then?" he ventured. The Cossack nodded.

"They were afraid of my power over my troops." He squared his shoulders and added proudly, "I was a colonel." His grayish brown eyes flashed with a pride of the past that had not been crushed by exile. "And now," he continued bitterly, "I am kicked by swine like Chichkin! And their new godless religion is that men are equal.—Bah!"

His eyes burned into Gran's. "I am to call the slug who shined my boots by the brotherly name of 'comrade,' and also the general under whom I have fought!—Do you think it will work?—Never!"

He took a long drink, and unburdened a lot of his ideas in a whisper.

"Mad Mikheal will pay for his moment of power. He can't go on collecting taxes and spending the money on women. He can't make the people call him '*barin*' and at the same time keep Moscow from finding it out. Nor can he go around shooting down innocent people, even in the name of this mad craze of communism—especially when the victims are foreigners."

"You say he has shot down foreigners?" asked Gran with well feigned incredulity.

"Americans," nodded Borka. "And America is the one country that the Central Government does not want to offend." He swung his gaze around to see that there was no one near them. He leaned over closer to his attentive listener.

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"You saw the man who came in immediately after Chichkin? The one who followed them out, who laughed at me on the floor?"

GRAN nodded that he had noticed that particular man, and the Cossack leaned even closer. He told Gran that he knew for a fact that the man was of the "*Ogpu*"—the Soviet secret police system. Its men were empowered to act against anything and everything which might be in any way detrimental to the Central Government.

"The *Gay-Pay-Oo?*" questioned Gran in an awed whisper.

"The *Gay-Pay-Oo,*" repeated Gurl Borka, in an equally awed tone.

"That man has been here now for a week," continued the Cossack. "Wait till he finds that Chichkin insists upon being addressed as *barin!*—Wait till he gets the truth about those five Americans, though I guess no one knows the facts in that case except Mad Mikheal, and perhaps one or two of the officers.

"The *Gay-Pay-Oo* has already made inquiries, but all the others fear Chichkin too much to talk. How Moscow ever heard about the massacre — and that's all you could call it—I don't understand. Our semi-annual mail had left before the Americans came here from their wrecked ship. Yet this fellow is right on the job, trying to find out what it is all about."

"Doesn't the *ispravnik* know that he's here?" asked Gran.

"I suppose he does, sure.—Leave it to his little spy system."

After a few moments of silence, Gran couldn't help but ask: "Why were the Americans killed?" He gripped the table to keep his hands steady as he asked that. He was half afraid to ask any questions concerning the other three. He wanted Borka to think that he was in complete ignorance of the deal.

"From what Boris, the cook, said he heard when Chichkin was talking to one of the officers, it seems that they had gold and wouldn't lead him to it. Guess he planned to put the fear of God into the other three."

"The other three?"

The Cossack spilled half his drink down his blouse front as he drained the glass before answering.

"And if they don't talk as soon as that *Gay-Pay-Oo* leaves, they'll get it, too. But they'll be tortured first."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

Flooding the Barren Lands

WESTERN Canada has been considering the ambitious proposal of smashing the prairie dry spells by damming the relatively narrow valleys of the Mackenzie and Coppermine Rivers to form a new lake almost double the size of the Great Lakes.

There is, however, one serious drawback to the project that will have to be considered first. While the land to be covered by the new lake is still largely unexplored and unoccupied, some parts of it are known to show signs of mineral wealth; and an examination by prospectors may show that it is far too valuable to be flooded.

John H. Spicer.

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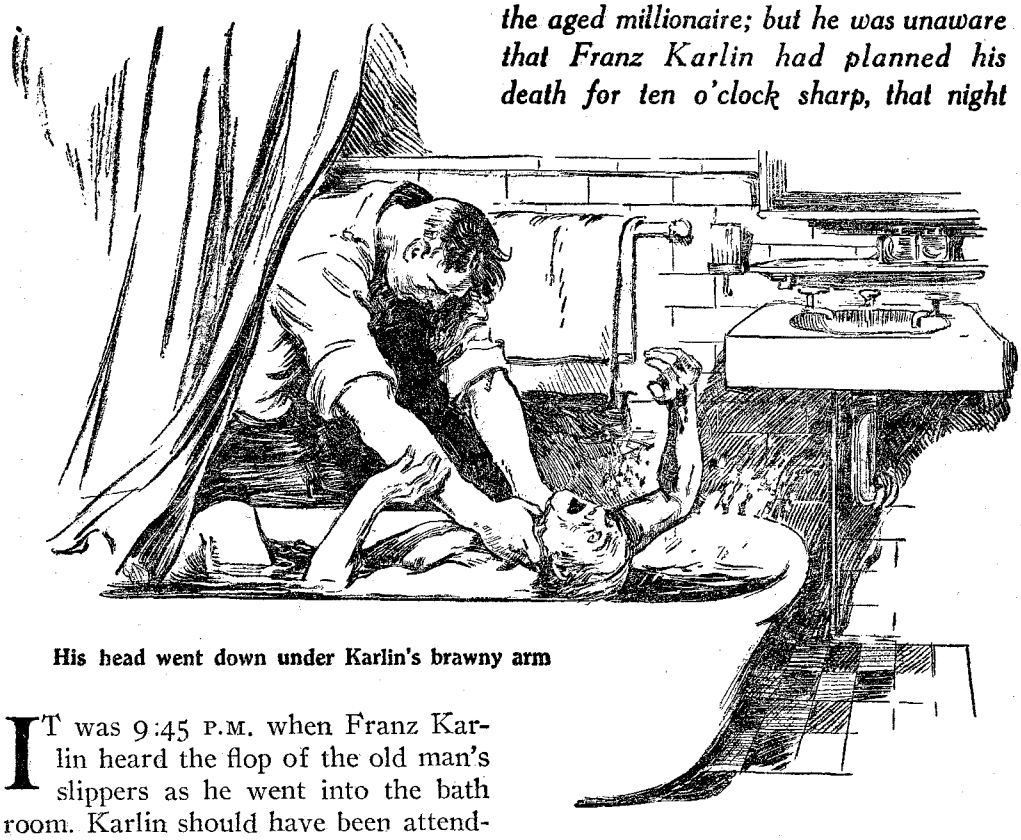
Death by the Clock

By RAY CUMMINGS

"You're my friend, not my servant," said the aged millionaire; but he was unaware that Franz Karlin had planned his death for ten o'clock sharp, that night



His head went down under Karlin's brawny arm

IT was 9:45 P.M. when Franz Karlin heard the flop of the old man's slippers as he went into the bath room. Karlin should have been attending to his household tasks; but instead, he was standing like a statue in a shadow of the upper hall, waiting and listening. A tall, powerful figure. His rolled shirt sleeves disclosed thick, hairy arms. His throat was a round column of muscle, supporting a bullet head of closely clipped black hair.

There was about Karlin an appearance of tremendous muscular strength; a suggestion of the professional wrestler in the heaviness of his shoulders. Karlin himself often thought of it, with sardonic inward amusement at the chain of circumstances which so incongruously, here in America, had made him valet and general servant to this half sick, frail old millionaire. It occurred to him now as with fingers clenching into the palms of his hands, he stood listening to old man Reese, who had begun running the water for his bed-time bath.

9:45—right to the minute. The methodical Reese did everything right to the minute. Karlin grinned into the

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shadows of the portière beside him. This death, too, would take place right to the minute. Half an hour now, and Reese would be dead. And Karlin's witnesses would come in three-quarters of an hour . . .

Karlin was tense, but not nervous. He had no nerves. It would be easy to pull off this job of killing Reese; his last criminal act, for out of this one would come riches enough to last a lifetime.

He moved noiselessly from the shadows, and met the old man at the bathroom door.

"Mr. Reese?"

"Eh? Oh, you, Karlin. You startled me. What you want?"

"I thought you would like I arrange your bath, sir."

The bathroom light fell upon the old man's frail figure. His wispy gray hair was awry; the dressing gown, half open, showed his chest and ribs, hairless and white. He was smiling up into Karlin's swart face gazing down at him.

"Oh, no, thank you, Karlin; I can do it myself. Besides, you know, I'm fussy about the temperature of the water."

He was always good-natured about his fussiness; he had to be, or Karlin could never have lasted with him these five years.

"Yes, sir." Karlin turned quietly away. Then he came back. "Some friends of mine, they are coming soon for a game of cards. You will not mind?"

"No, of course not, Karlin. You are my friend—not my servant. You know that. Always glad to have you.—Where are you going to play?"

"In the library, sir? Like the last night? Or if maybe it was that our noise would keep you awake—?"

"Like to have it, Karlin. I'm not an invalid. Three men coming?"

"Yes, sir. They live near here—two of them. The other is Cafferty—"

The old man grinned. "Officer Cafferty? Nice fellow. Don't take too much of his money away from him."

Reese went back into the bathroom. He seemed in a particularly good mood to-night. Karlin heard his chuckle.

Karlin moved away down the hall. It was a daring thing, inviting this policeman here the night he was killing Reese. A stroke of genius. Who would think that a murderer would dare have a policeman on the scene of the crime?

KARLIN padded down the upper hall, his lithe tread noiseless on the Oriental rugs. At Reese's bedroom door he glanced at his watch. 9:50 o'clock. Plenty of time before Cafferty and the others would arrive. He had told them emphatically not to come before 10:30, when Mr. Reese would be in bed.

Nothing to do now but wait a few minutes while Reese shaved and got into the tub. The house was silent; no one in it save Karlin and the old man. It was not a big house; just these two stories. It was handsomely furnished, but the old-fashioned building hardly seemed like the residence of a retired millionaire with no family and few friends. It was set in rather a lonely neighborhood here in this suburban town. No close neighbors; thick trees outside the windows.

The minutes dragged. From down the hall, Karlin could hear the old man puttering about his shaving.

The bedroom here was hot as hell. The old man always insisted upon keeping the house very hot. Karlin wiped the sweat from his forehead. There was only a dim light here. It

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showed the big, luxurious bed, Oriental rugs on the polished floor. He would have to move some of those rugs when he used the old man's slippers . . . He saw now on the dresser the opened package of new leather slippers which Reese had bought to-day. They would be all right to make the necessary sounds . . .

Karlin knew he could contrive the sounds up here convincingly. In his boyhood he had once had a job making off-stage sounds. And he had never lost his skill at ventriloquism.

Franz Karlin was forty years old now. His had been a wide and varied career. Of mid-European birth, he had become a vaudeville tumbler—youngest of the athletes who, no relation to each other, had been famous as the "Six Brothers Jensen." Later, Karlin had been a professional wrestler. Then he had developed a vaudeville act of his own. "Vento, the Ventriloquist," had been known throughout the amusement places of Europe.

But the money always got away. Karlin, too, had had several experiences with the law, and that had been expensive. In Berlin he had been in jail for over a year. Then, shaking it all loose, he had come to America, where no one knew him. Even Reese had never heard him mention his vaudeville experiences, or ventriloquism. He had a sheaf of old newspaper clippings, from those days when the London Music Halls applauded "Vento—Master of the Trickery of Sound." The clippings were locked in a bureau drawer of his bedroom. Neither Reese nor any one else here had ever seen them.

Karlin's old skill would stand him in good stead to-night. And he knew that he could face police questions without quivering over it. No policeman could ever bully him. None ever had—and several had tried it!

KARLIN came out of his roving thoughts with a start. Ten o'clock! But what of it? There was half an hour yet. Plenty of things could be done in half an hour by a calm, determined man.

A stroke of good luck had made the murder worth while. The estate of Elmer T. Reese was estimated at well over three million dollars, and practically all of it was destined for charity. Karlin knew that he was listed for a miserably few thousands. That was a year ago—up to a month ago. Then Reese had quarreled with the directors of one of his pet charities, and had come home in a towering rage.

"Imagine them talking to me that way, Karlin. Me, who have stood back of them like the rock of Gibraltar for years. Nearly half a million I've given them—one time or another. The ingrates! And they know there's eight hundred thousand more coming when I die. Lot o' money, Karlin . . ."

Lot of money, indeed.—It seemed then as though some premonition came to Karlin. It coursed through him like the tingle of an electric shock, so that he stood tense. The fuming, irate old man had then and there declared that they would never get the promised eight hundred thousand. His roving eyes seemed seeking for a place to put the money. His gaze rested upon Karlin.

"I'll give it to you, Karlin. Gad, that's what I'll do! Some one who'll appreciate it—has some deference for my opinion on things. That's what I'll do to them. I'll show them—!"

And he had changed his will. With his angry mood still persisting, he had summoned his lawyer and executed the

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new document. But Karlin knew him well enough to know that his temper wouldn't last, and now, while the spite document was in force, Karlin had to take advantage of his opportunity . . .

In Reese's bedroom, Karlin abruptly awoke to the fact that his moment was at hand. It was 10:05. He padded from the room, moving noiselessly along the hall. His bullet head was lowered a little; his thick, wide shoulders were hunched; at the half-opened bathroom door he paused, instinctively with opened hands outstretched, like a wrestler alert to every move of his antagonist. And then he spoke:

"Mr. Reese, there is a thing very strange—"

He shifted himself through the door and into the bathroom. The scene before him was like a tableau, and he saw that everything was as it should be. Small, old-fashioned bathroom; shade drawn over the single window; an electric wall clock near the light, plugged into a wall socket near the tub—and the clock said 10:06. A shower curtain was drawn back on the further side; and the frail figure of Reese sitting there in the tub, with a cake of soap in his hand and the water up to his bony chest.—Clear, in that second, as a photographic image—and everything was correct.

"Eh, Karlin? What you say?"

Without a word of answer, Karlin's head and shoulders came down in a wrestler's crouch; his hands, with groping fingers, stretched out. He was conscious of a scowl that swept his face as he leaped.

REESE no more than tensed, stiffened where he sat, and over his upturned face came a vague expression of surprise. Then his head and shoulders went down under Karlin's hand. There were bubbles—little silent things that might have represented an effort to scream under water. The thin legs came churning up, but Karlin's brawny arm held them. So absurdly easy to hold this squirming, twisting, heaving little thing—to shove down the shoulders against the bottom of the tub! Why, it was like pinning them to a mat, with the grinning, ghoulish spectre of death standing invisibly here, stooping like a referee to see that it was done correctly . . .

A few seconds. No, not long enough. A leg got loose, lashed. But the crouching Karlin quickly pinned it. Amazing death-strength to this frail, pink-white thing. The hips heaved until Karlin had to lean well down to hold them. Must not bruise the body! Strange rules to this affair. No tell-tale marks of violence. Careful not to press a hand upon the tub and leave finger prints!—Would the accursed thing never give up struggling?—Karlin caught a glimpse of the contorted, agonized face with eyes staring up through the water. What a horrible look! Bubbles had stopped coming from the gaping mouth. The lips were moving, jerking—trying to gasp at air and getting only water.

The struggles were lessening now. Not much strength left. Karlin saw in the thin, stringy throat, the protruding Adam's apple bobbing rhythmically up and down. The sucking, gaping lips were drinking in the water. A long, soothing last drink . . .

One of the arms twitched free of Karlin's grip. It came up, flailed down again. It seemed to Karlin that an incredible time went by, but at last the thing lay still. It was not even drinking now. Karlin released his hold. It lay sodden in the water.

Karlin came as though from a dream

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into triumphant reality. He stood up. He was breathing hard. Excitement? He banished the idea. He was not excited in the least. He stood calmly surveying the scene, gauging exactly what had occurred and what must be done.

Surprise swept him. The drowning of Reese had needed more violence than he had realized. Karlin's rolled shirt sleeves were wet from elbow to shoulder; his chest was wet, through shirt and undershirt; though from the waist down he was absolutely dry. It would be easy to fix his own appearance, however.

The bathroom floor and the wall were splashed a little with water; the small towel rug on the floor was wet and crumpled. Karlin picked it up; laid it carefully outside the bathroom door. Then he stripped to the waist; put his wet shirt and undershirt with the wet bathroom rug.

The pink-white dead thing still lay in the tub with staring, open eyes. Karlin saw now that in the struggle either he or Reese had pulled at the dangling shower curtain; it was torn loose from the sliding rings of the overhead bracket. It had fallen, and hung on the side of the tub, half down between the tub and wall, and half in the water. Reasonable enough! The death struggle of Reese, supposedly fainting in his bath, would account for that . . .

THEN Karlin saw something else, and it struck him with a rush of horror. The electric clock had stopped! It still marked 10:06, and a few seconds; the big second hand was not revolving! In the struggle, Karlin's hand had struck the cord, pulled the plug from the wall socket. He saw now where it dangled to the floor.

The thing gave Karlin a shock. Not because it was difficult to rectify. He plugged it back, and the clock started again. But suppose he had not noticed it? What a give-away! Detectives coming in here, and seeing a clock plainly marking the time of death! Especially since that wall socket was too far from the tub to have been reached by the supposedly fainting Reese. It would have been plain evidence of murder.

Then Karlin had another shock. He had not yet re-set the clock to the correct time! His watch now marked 10:18. Twelve more minutes and his friends would arrive for the card game. He would have to hurry. But he was wary of too much haste now.

He set the clock carefully to agree with his watch, which he was sure was correct. Then he saw something else. The little red signal on the clock face showed its warning that the current had been cut off. Karlin fixed that.

He spent two or three minutes more in the bathroom. The body was easily propped up into a position that looked plausible—a frail old man feeling faintness come over him, struggling a little to get out of the tub, slumping down as unconsciousness came, and lying twisted sidewise with face under the water. The limp thing was horrible to touch; Karlin was glad when he had finished with it.

His movements were quick and deft now. From the upper hall linen closet he brought two clean bath towels and a clean white rug for the bathroom floor. With the towels he wiped the floor and the walls until all evidence of the splashing was gone. Then he spread the rug neatly by the tub, and tossed out to the hall floor the now wet and soiled towels, with his shirts and the other rug, to be burned.

Everything ready. At the hand basin he turned on the hot water faucet. The

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small jet of water ran out the drain as fast as it came in. He made sure of that for a moment, so that there could be no overflow. He left the water running. Soon it was very hot. A white cloud of steam came from it. The steam would fill the small bathroom, and give a reason for Reese's fainting.

The bathroom door had a spring lock on the inside. The catch was off now. Karlin clicked it on; and with a last glance at the tragic tableau of the room, he stepped carefully out and closed the door after him. The door clicked; he tried the knob. The door was locked on the inside.

Karlin stood a moment, listening to the sound of the running jet of water in the hand basin. In the silence of the house it was plainly audible, even through this closed door. That was what he had expected; he would need that sound to go with the others he would create.

TEN-TWENTY-FIVE. In the next five minutes Karlin had burned his shirts, the rug and towels in the furnace. He washed himself thoroughly, so that even the smell of the bathroom soap would not cling to him; put on clean shirts; and at 10:30 he was in the library on the lower floor, calmly smoking, waiting for the arrival of his guests.

How easy it had all been! Karlin was as calm as though for an hour he had been sitting here doing nothing.

He rose at the brief ring of the front door-bell. He stood quietly in the midst of the low-voiced confusion as his three guests crowded in.

"Sure, gentlemen, we play in the library. Come in."

Like the master of the house, he ushered them. *Master!* He was the master, now at last.

Officer Cafferty pulled back. It was the first time he had been here. "We don't want to be takin' advantage of him. Is he asleep? A nice, kindly old fellow he is—I'll be sayin' that for 'im. But our voices, Karlin—"

"He don't mind," said one of the other men. "Last week we was here—"

Karlin stood quietly smiling. "He is running the water for his bath—hear it?"

The faint sound of the water was audible down here—so faint that no one could have said that it was in the hand basin and not in the tub.

Karlin gestured to the ceiling of the library as he added, "You sit down. He is in his bedroom up there. I will ask him."

"Sure," agreed Cafferty. "Not for anything would we be after botherin'—" A big, red-faced, sandy-haired fellow, this Cafferty. Just smart enough to make a good witness.

Karlin paused in the doorway. He drew out his watch, and gestured to the library clock. "Twenty-five minutes to eleven. We shall play until one? Here—or in the kitchen—?"

"Sure.—Any old place suits us."

The three men sat a little awkwardly in the big, leather chairs. Karlin smiled at them. "Then you stay just where you are, I will ask of him—"

With unhurried step Karlin mounted the stairs. He was still smiling. He had felt calmly confident like this when, as Vento, the Ventriloquist, he had faced his audiences. And it was so simple to imitate the voice of Reese, which he had studied so carefully.

AT the head of the stairs he called gently:

"Oh, Mr. Reese—my friends they have come. We want ask you—"

Like a panther, Karlin swiftly and

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noiselessly padded to the open bedroom door. The dead thing locked back there in the bathroom could not answer—but how easy it was for Karlin's skill!

"Eh? What you want, Karlin?"

His head was in the doorway, with muffling hand over his mouth as he simulated Reese's voice. This off-stage, unseen drama hardly needed ventriloquism! Karlin noiselessly ran back from the doorway a few paces, scuffled his feet on the bare floor and again approached the door.

"My friends, Mr. Reese—they are 'fraid we bother you."

He was in the room now, with normal thumping tread. Then he turned silent, followed one of the heavy Oriental rugs, in a second he had gained the dresser, and snatched the slippers from the opened package.

Time for Reese to speak again!

"Playing cards, Karlin?"

"Yes, sir. A little poker, like last time. My friend Cafferty is here—"

Time now for Reese to come out of the bathroom and move across the room! Karlin noiselessly turned back the big rug, and shoved a small one aside. He thrust clenched fists into the toes of the limp leather slippers. His feet on the rug and his hands in the clacking slippers on the bare floor he bent double and flapped the slippers for the old man's shaking tread.

Time to talk again! "Eh, Karlin? You say Cafferty? Officer Cafferty? Nice fellow! Tell him to watch himself playing poker with you."

Karlin had flapped back to the dresser. A second or two, noiselessly replacing the rugs, putting the slippers back into their package.

"I tell him that, sir. Shall we play in the library?"

"Perhaps the kitchen, Karlin—don't you think? You'll feel freer—make all the noise you like back there. I'm going to take my bath and go to bed."

At the doorway he called, "Thank you, sir," and trod the hall with a noisy step. Plenty of noise now! The men in the library mustn't notice the ensuing silence upstairs! Noisy tread!

HE called down to them from the stairs. He herded them noisily from the library, back into the kitchen and closed its door.

"Now we can be free. Laugh all you want. Sure, I have the cards and chips here—move that table, will you, Cafferty?"

"Who banks?" asked one of the men. "Not me—I did it the last time."

The game began. Down here, no sounds from upstairs could be heard. Reese was supposed to be taking his bath now.

Karlin was steadily losing. It was hard to keep his mind on the game. He was facing the kitchen's electric clock. It was very similar to the one in the bathroom. What a fool he had been not to notice at once that he had stopped that clock! What a horrible error that would have been.

Karlin was annoyed at his thoughts—annoyed at his bad luck in the game—at the sarcasm the players were beginning to hurl at him. Annoyed by this necessary delay, too. Eleven o'clock. Late enough!

He suddenly cocked his head, listening. "What was that?"

Not hard to get them out of the kitchen and into the lower foyer. Karlin and all of them agreed that they had heard nothing; but it wasn't difficult to get them to follow him silently halfway up the stairs while he went to Reese's bedroom, to make sure that the old man hadn't called out to him.

Not in the bedroom! The bed un-

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touched! What was this? Still in the bathroom? Noise now. Plenty of noise. The alarm—

Of course they joined him at the bathroom door while he pounded.

"Mr. Reese! What is wrong? You sick? Let me in—"

Pounding on the locked door! Then all of them listening to that running water in the basin.

"Bust it in, you fellers—"

"Mr. Reese! Open up the door!"

"God, he's—he's—"

Dead! Of course he was dead. Karlin smiled quietly to himself as he shouted and pounded. But the door resisted their efforts, as Karlin had known it would.

It was Karlin who telephoned for the doctor, only a few blocks away—and at Cafferty's wild shouts, added a call for the near-by police.

He was still at the telephone when the men brought from the cellar the heavy iron bar used to shake the furnace grate. He followed them upstairs only in time to see them crash the door lock.

Clouds of white vapor swirled around the steam-filled room.

OFFICER CAFFERTY told his story with professional clearness. He had, of course, heard Karlin upstairs talking with Mr. Reese.

"You were familiar with Mr. Reese's voice?" the police captain demanded.

"Sure, that I was. The old gentleman was many times talkin' to me, down here by the corner. A nice old feller."

"Go on, Cafferty. At what time did you hear them talking?"

Cafferty remembered that it was about twenty-five minutes to eleven.

"Jus' that," said one of the other men who had been there. "Remember? Karlin pointed to the clock—"

It seemed to Karlin, as he sat among them now in the library, that this captain of the police was an unpleasantly suspicious fellow. Looking for trouble, where there wasn't any. He was a stalwart, gray-haired man of fifty-odd.

The doctor, who had speedily arrived, had tried his best, but old Reese was dead beyond any possibility of reviving.

It was now well after midnight. The police had come about 11:30. The house, for over half an hour now, had been in a turmoil. Several of Cafferty's fellow policemen were here; a fingerprint man; a photographer; and one or two plainclothesmen. All in charge of this Captain Gregg. The coroner was coming, but he had not yet arrived. And there was a man named Franklyn—a tall, thin fellow in plain clothes. He was not under Gregg, quite evidently. All the policemen seemed to have a great respect for this Franklyn, and Karlin learned that he was a private consulting detective—a fellow with a flair for science. He had solved several notorious crimes by finding some hidden, scientific clue. Karlin chuckled to himself. He could poke around here all he liked.

Gregg and Franklyn had been upstairs where most of the activity was going on. The body was now in Reese's bedroom; Reese's doctor was with it, waiting for the coroner.

Now Gregg came down, and had Cafferty tell it all over again. Cafferty had heard—sure he could identify the voice—old Reese talking with Karlin. Heard plainly every word that was said. And heard the old man walking in his slippers across the bedroom floor. And all three of the men recalled hearing the sound of the running water.

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Karlin chuckled. In all the world he could not have fallen upon a more perfect witness than Cafferty, who had been the first of them to rush into the bathroom and discover the body.

"THE bathroom floor was dry?" Gregg was saying now. "No water splashed on the wall?"

"No, sir. I watched for that. An' the little white rug on the floor was clean an' dry. He got in the tub, cap'n—an' he drowned there—never got out."

The doctor had agreed with all of them how the accident had happened. Reese had closed and locked the bathroom door. He had turned on the hot water in the hand basin. Karlin told the reason for that.

"He sometimes fuss because it take several minutes for the water to get hot—"

Reese had evidently let it run to get it hot; had forgotten it; the room had filled with steam. The doctor said that Reese might easily have fainted, clutching at the shower curtain as he felt himself going. He might have screamed, but down in the kitchen, where a noisy card game was in progress, no one would have heard him. Perhaps he then lost consciousness before he was able to rise from the tub, slumped down with his face falling under the water and was drowned.

There was a little hitch here which had caused Karlin momentary annoyance.

"Why," Gregg demanded, "did he run the hot water in the hand basin? What did he want it for?"

Karlin had not thought of that. "Why—why, I suppose to shave."

Gregg smiled his unpleasant smile. "The body shows that he had shaved very recently. Franklyn thinks perhaps even this evening. His shaving brush was still wet."

So Franklyn was doing some thinking on this thing, was he? Karlin felt a little contemptuous; but in spite of that a wave of vague distrust swept him. Why was this Captain Gregg so unpleasant? And where was Franklyn now? Upstairs? What was he doing upstairs?

Gregg was repeating, "Reese quite evidently didn't run the hot water in the hand basin in order to shave."

Karlin gestured. "I am sorry I cannot read his mind why he turn on the hot water."

Gregg let it pass. But his unpleasantness continued; and now, here in the library, it suddenly burst forth.

"There are a number of strange angles to this affair, Karlin."

That puzzled and startled Cafferty and the other two men, but Karlin did not move a muscle of his stolid face. In his opinion Gregg was bluffing. This policeman had probably heard from the doctor about Reese's will.

"I do not know what is queer," Karlin said carefully.

"Several things. Cafferty and these two friends of yours heard sounds upstairs, but they did not actually see anything."

Karlin went so far as to permit himself to smile. The remark was not worth answering. He returned Gregg's steady gaze with ironic amusement.

"We were wondering—" Gregg went on, and now his gaze shifted to Cafferty "—wondering if you might be mistaken in what you heard, because you couldn't see anything."

Cafferty shook his head, emphatically. But he looked uneasy. "Sure, Cap'n Gregg, if I wasn't positive—an' these other fellers— We all heard it."

"I know you did." Gregg stood up

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abruptly. "Come upstairs all of you. I'll show you what looks queer to us."

SILENTLY they followed him up. Karlin too, was puzzled. What had gone wrong in the bedroom that looked queer? Or was this a bluff to frighten him? They had the wrong man, if they intended to try that.

The thing on the bed was covered by a sheet. Karlin cast a brief, calm gaze at it. Where was Franklyn? He wasn't here. The men in the room all stood silent; it seemed that the eyes of every one of them were upon Karlin.

He said abruptly, "Do I think right that you accuse me of something, Captain Gregg? I am no liar."

Gregg smiled for the first time; but it was an unpleasant smile. He turned to Cafferty.

"This is what's queer. You heard the flap of Reese's slippers as he crossed this room. You and both these other men have described it to me several times—and always the same. You heard him walk at least ten or fifteen feet on the bare floor. But there is no bare floor here, except very small spaces between these rugs!"

It was obvious. Karlin saw Cafferty staring stupidly. Gregg bent down and carefully lifted back the large rug.

"With this one placed this way, Cafferty, and perhaps this smaller one moved away, he'd have been able to walk that far on the bare floor. As a matter of fact, these rugs have been recently moved—the dust-line around them shows that."

"I remember that the big rug was pushed away like that," Karlin said, relief sweeping over him.

"You didn't push it?"

"No."

"But why would Reese have done it?"

The policeman was like a child.

Karlin grinned. "I cannot tell his mind. Sorry. Is that all—?"

"No, it isn't. Where are the slippers he wore?"

That gave Karlin a little start. He recalled that Reese had made him throw away the only pair of old slippers he had. And Reese had gone to the bathroom in his bare feet. The new slippers Karlin himself had replaced in their package.

Karlin said, "He was with slippers. I do not know—"

"These, then?" said Gregg. He lifted the new slippers from the box on the bureau. "They look as though they had never been worn—"

"But he wore them," Karlin insisted stolidly. "I did not just notice, but—"

"They look," Gregg interrupted, "as though a fist instead of a foot had been thrust into them. See the bulges in that limp leather where the knuckles were?—Besides, why would he put them back into their package?"

Karlin was nonplused. But he made an attempt to smile.

GREGG tossed away the slippers. He said abruptly:

"We searched your room, Karlin, and one bureau drawer we found locked. That seemed strange, so we opened it.—Brayley, give me those newspaper clippings."

The British newspaper accounts of Vento, the Ventriloquist! Gregg held out one which had a picture of Karlin, without make-up.

"That's you, isn't it? Looks like you, anyway."

For the first time in his life, Karlin felt that he had nerves. Something pulling at him inside, making him feel queer all over and dulling his thoughts.

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The room wavered. He heard his voice stammering:

"Yes—me! Why not? I once was a wrestler—"

He shouldn't have admitted that! Too late now! Still, what did it all prove? A man had a right to have been on the stage.

Gregg said quickly, "This is you—a ventriloquist. You see, Cafferty, you might have been tricked. It's possible.—In fact, we think you were tricked."

Might have been! That was far from proof. You couldn't convict a man on what might have been.

From down the hall came the slow, quiet voice of Franklyn.

"I say, Captain Gregg, it figures the way I thought it would. Bring him in here."

Franklyn was in the bathroom.—What figured the way he thought it would?

Karlin said slowly, "I have tell the truth. Why you want to accuse—?"

"Accuse you of murdering Reese?" Gregg finished. "We do accuse you! God knows you look pretty dumb, but I guess you're smart enough . . . We've got you!"

"Because—I was on the stage?" Karlin managed sarcastically. "Because I might have imitate a voice which I did not—"

"Because— Come here and I'll show you."

Gregg was shoving him roughly from the room. All these men crowding upon him. His instinct was to knock them all aside. Weaklings! He could crunch two or three of them at once in his arms.

He gasped, "What you doing?"

"Got something else to show you." Into the bathroom. They completely filled it.

"Big hunk o' meat—too dumb to understand."

Who said that? He could take the fellow in one of his arms and squeeze him until his ribs cracked . . . Was this Franklyn speaking now? No! It was still Gregg. But Franklyn was here, leaning up against the wall, watching. His coat was off; his shirt sleeves were rolled up. He had obviously been working, but he was finished now. Working at what? Finished with what? Things which did not belong here in the bathroom were standing on the hand basin. Karlin tried to see them, but somebody got in the way.

Somebody had said, "Dumb as an ox." And Gregg was saying, "He's not so dumb as you'd think. Want to tell him what you found, Franklyn?"

FRANKLYN took a step forward and held Karlin with his quiet gaze.

"See here, Karlin, you fixed this thing so that the time at which everything happened is clear enough. Your friends came at ten-thirty. They heard the sounds upstairs a few minutes later. What you want us to believe is that Reese went to take his bath about ten-forty-five."

"I no care what you t'ink!" It seemed to Karlin that his English was deserting him. The bathroom was swaying; but in the blur he could see the face of the electric clock. Nearly midnight now. He heard himself stammering, "The clock—"

"Not the clock, Karlin. We've got a better time-piece than that."

They had shoved Karlin to the bathtub. Franklyn was pointing to where the shower curtain still lay, half in the water and half down between the tub and wall.

"There's the time-piece, Karlin!

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Maybe you never heard of capillary action, but water can run through the little tubes of the threads in fabric. Ever heard of that? Or the principle of a siphon? If the outside end is lower than the surface of the water—then the water will run out. Siphon out!"

This strange thing! This unseen time-piece! Karlin stammered, against all his effort to check himself, "Why—but what—?"

Franklyn had turned and shoved one of the men aside, so that Karlin could see those things standing on the hand basin. A little rubber bulb syringe belonging to Mr. Reese; it had always been here in the bathroom medicine cabinet. And ranged along the edge of the basin, several small empty cream bottles which had been brought up from the kitchen. There was water in them now.

Franklyn was saying, "My emergency apparatus, Karlin. I gathered up and measured the water which has been siphoning out of the tub through that shower curtain. There wasn't any water on the bathroom floor except behind the tub, where quite a pool of it had come down through the fabric of the curtain and collected on the floor. I sucked it up with the syringe and measured the quantity of it in those half-pint cream bottles. There were very nearly three half pints."

He seemed to be speaking very slowly, to make sure that Karlin would understand. "I did this at eleven-forty-five. Three half-pints had already flowed out, so that all I needed to know was the rate of flow in order to be able to count back to when the flow started. I've been sitting here measuring the time it would take a half-pint to flow down. I found it took a trifle over thirty-three minutes. So those three half pints before I got here must have taken a hundred minutes. A hundred minutes before eleven-forty-five. A very nice time-piece, Karlin. Not exact to minutes and seconds, undoubtedly. But it tells us when he died—at about 10:05!"

Somebody said, "Better watch him! He's a strong brute!"

Were these handcuffs they were clacking on his wrists? He was panting. He heard his guttural voice—his English almost gone—"An' I t'ink you nefer catch me—"

THE END.

Where Horses Wear Pants

THE rulers of Guelfey, in French Cameroun, are a cast of Arab-negritic conquerors, descendants of Arabian slavers, who ruled that part of Africa until fifty years ago, and their negro concubines.

The Sultan and the headmen of Guelfey ride horseback, and so do their scores of half-breed retainers. In ordinary days, and in war, their horses are saddled and bridled in the ordinary way, though with a great abundance of gaudy trappings. On gala days and state occasions, however, both the fore and the hind legs of the animals are forced into trousers made of very heavy silk, bright of color and gorgeously embroidered. A horse's natural repugnance for pants is enhanced, of course, by the stiflingly hot climate, so that the unfortunate beasts either kick lustily or seem downcast and decidedly unhappy.

Armand Brigaud.

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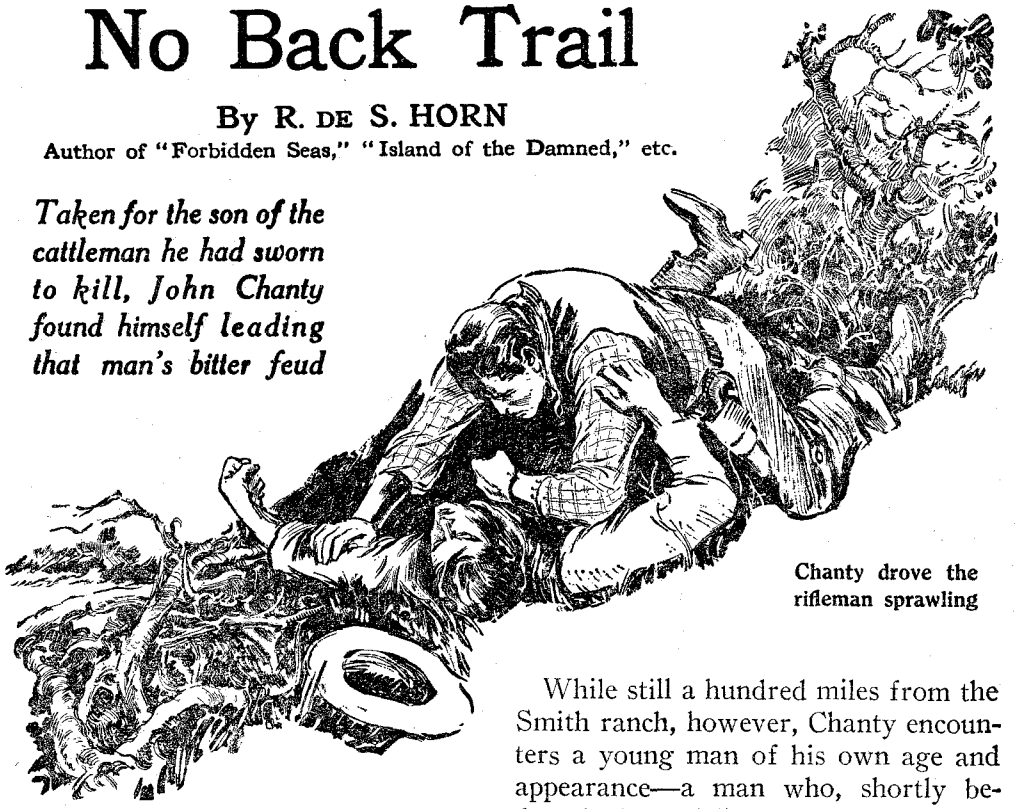
No Back Trail

By R. DE S. HORN

Author of "Forbidden Seas," "Island of the Damned," etc.

Taken for the son of the cattleman he had sworn to kill, John Chanty found himself leading that man's bitter feud



Chanty drove the rifleman sprawling

THIS STORY HAS JUST BEGUN—START IT NOW.

JOHN CHANTY, professional gunman, was on his way to kill a man. This time, however, it was a personal score Chanty was going to settle. Several years before, near the Lazy S ranch of Anse Smith, an unoffending sheepman had been shot down at night and his sheep scattered. The man's fifteen-year-old son had disappeared—presumably had crawled off into the bushes and died of a wound.

Now John Chanty, cold eyed, sometimes smiling wryly, but never laughing, looking young for one who had a reputation of being one of the quickest shots in the West, was coming back to kill the man who had murdered that sheepman.

While still a hundred miles from the Smith ranch, however, Chanty encounters a young man of his own age and appearance—a man who, shortly before, had saved Chanty's life in a quicksand pit. Now it is the stranger who is in trouble. A posse is after him for robbery. Chanty helps him fight, but the other is killed. His dying request is that Chanty, whose identity he does not know, go to the Lazy S ranch and deliver several thousand dollars to Anse Smith—the very man Chanty is on his way to kill. The dying man says he is Buddy Smith, Anse's son.

Going on to Eagle Rock, the town near Smith's ranch, Chanty learns that Smith has been blinded by a bullet fired from ambush, apparently by one of the sheepmen who are trying to drive the cattlemen out of the district.

When Mollie, Smith's adopted daughter, throws her arms around Chanty and greets him as her long-absent brother, Chanty does not have the

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heart to tell her that the real Buddy is dead. And, when he finds out how King Anderson, leading sheepman of the region, is threatening foreclosure of Smith's mortgage unless Mollie marries him, Chanty decides to carry out the masquerade as Buddy until he can set things to rights. When he sees Anse Smith he feels only pity for the blind old man, but cannot learn who had killed the elder Chanty.

CHAPTER VII.

DRY-GULCHED.

SIX miles up the Crazy Horse was the Schomberg ranch, setting back from the main stream just as the Smith Lazy S did at the other end. Schomberg's ranch guarded the only reliable ford at the head of the valley, just as the Lazy S guarded the ford nearer to town.

Between the two ranches branched out the Little Crazy Horse, a meandering creek half as wide, spring-fed back in the foothills behind the crescent of the valley, and forming the ordinary water supply for McMurdo's ranch and the other outfits further back from the main stream. In times of drought, up till this last year which was the first time the main stream had ever gone dry, by gentlemen's agreement the herds of McMurdo and the other back valley ranchers had been allowed to water at the main stream in the infrequent years when the Little Crazy Horse had been insufficient.

In the low bottoms not far from the little foothill stream Chanty found the two wells, with wooden troughs, which Anse Smith had put down in the middle of the drought with money borrowed from King Anderson. Now that the drought had been broken and the streams ran gurgling again, the wells were idle, their pump rods disconnected.

At Schomberg's, he found the stout old German had gone to Eagle Rock, but he introduced himself to Elliott, the Schomberg foreman, a firm-jawed cowman of almost middle age who shook hands promptly, looked at Chanty with a critical eye, remarked that he had grown almost out of recollection, but that he was damned glad to see him back. Especially as there were good prospects of a fight coming with that double-dash blankety-dash t r a i t o r across the creek who had gone "woolly" and, like every blankety-blank lamb chaser, was grabbing all in sght.

A half hour's talk with the Schomberg foreman left Chanty with a greater feeling of assurance than he had felt since precipitately fleeing from Mollie's questioning that day. At least average acquaintances of Buddy whom he might meet would not be hard to satisfy as to his identity. Rafferty's reminiscences, into which Chanty had drawn the garrulous old stableman by deft questioning, had given Chanty plenty of information about Buddy Smith's past to satisfy any ordinary questioning. It was only with Mollie Smith that Chanty felt he could not safely carry his masquerade through.

It was late in the afternoon when Chanty swung back north. But he did not ride toward the Lazy S; instead he headed toward Eagle Rock. As he neared the ford on the road to town, the cowboy on lookout, Jack Burtis, again rode out to meet him.

"YOU ain't on your way back into Eagle?" Burtis inquired, after a cigarette and a few casual words.

"No, I'm not," answered Chanty,

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sitting quietly in his saddle and watching the fringing alders along the creek bed as they curved away into the evening.

"That's good," said McMurdo's puncher. "I was afraid you might be. Eagle Rock ain't exactly what you might call a safe place for any lone cowboy these days—especially you. Too many of Anderson's killers hang out there in the evenin's. Ace Connor, Red Rawlins, and that sort. Bein' hired for gun-slingin', you see, they kinda figger they're above work, an' so they generally poke into town in the evenin' for the drinks or a round o' poker at one o' the tables."

Again that queer little quirk of the lip corners came to Chanty's mouth.

"I'm glad to hear that," he said. "Because that may make it easier. You see, I was just figurin' on droppin' over to King Anderson's for a few minutes."

"Heh—Huh—*What?*" The cowboy's face was incredulous. "King Anderson's—!"

"That's right. He lives up the other side o' the creek here, five miles up the road, don't he?"

But McMurdo's puncher did not answer the question. He reached out and grabbed Chanty's shoulder tightly. "Man, are you crazy?" he yelped. "Go to King Anderson's—after what you done to him yesterday! Don't you wanta live no longer? Don't you know they'll shoot you down over there like they would a lobo wolf?"

"They might—if they knew I was coming," said Chanty. "But I'm betting that's the one thing King won't be expecting me to do—come right out to his place like that. And I've got to see him—about that mortgage. We only got a few more days."

"Then send him a message—write him a letter; Rafferty'll see he gets it! But goin' out there to Anderson's 'ull be just like pokin' your head in a rattlesnake's mouth!"

Chanty shook his head. "He can claim he didn't get the message or somethin'. When I tell him myself, he'll know he's been told."

He started to loosen his reins to ride on. But the McMurdo cowboy held on like a leech. "Well, then if you gotta go, wait'll I pick up two-three more fellows! I can be back with 'em in half an hour."

Chanty reached up and shook off the impeding hand. "Much obliged, cowboy—I'll remember that. But three-four men 'ull be worse than just one—they proba'ly won't pay much attention to just one man ridin' up there. An' all I want to do, is get there—I'll get back, all right. See you some more, Burtis."

He was gone, his horse loping easily down across the flat, and pausing for a moment before stepping daintily into the water.

Behind, Burtis looked after him for a moment undecidedly, opened his mouth as if to shout something, then suddenly with a curse wheeled his mount and rode rapidly off.

SPLASHING and sloshing through the rippling Crazy Horse, Chanty's horse mounted the slight slope on the farther side and crossed the little flat into the mouth of the gully by which the road pitched upward to the table upon which Eagle Rock lay. A mile or so out of Eagle, according to Burtis and others, was where the road to King Anderson's sheep outfit branched off.

The ground on this north side of the creek, different from the south side which was fairly open, was clothed

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with cedar, scrub oak and plum brush, with here and there mountain mahogany. It would be fairly easy for a dozen men on this side to push their way almost unseen, Chanty thought, whereas a surprise invasion of the more open range on the opposite side would be almost impossible as long as the cowmen had their sentries out.

Chanty was thinking of that more than where his horse was going. But he knew old Coon—set his nose on a cow path or a trail, and he would keep ambling along at his steady lope until turned or pulled up.

But even old Coon, pushing steadily along in late evening, with dusk almost approaching, could not k n o w every loose rock in an uneven road at best. A fist-size rock, loosened in the gully side by the rains that had broken the drought, had rolled into the trail. Coon's hoof caught on it, slipped—Coon plunged forward, stumbling, caught himself. Chanty, riding carelessly, was almost pitched over the horse's neck. He threw out his hand, caught at the horn, started to pull himself back into the saddle—and then suddenly did not.

Like a bolt of lightning from a clear sky, something had cracked whiplike in his ear as Coon stumbled, something like a hot iron had lashed at the side of his neck, and gone on rattling into the brush beyond.

Only a man who has had hot lead burn him before could have coördinated his thoughts and muscles as quickly as Chanty did then. Even as the ringing crack of a rifle sounded out from the higher ground on the right hand side, Chanty had let his clutching hand slip from the horn it had already caught; the same motion threw him on and down, over Coon's near shoulder, crashing into the brush on the lower side, leaving his hat caught in the tops of the brush like a banner.

Coon, feeling his rider's weight leave him and with the reins dropped forward and over his head, stopped stock still and turned an inquiring and half disgusted eye toward where his owner should be getting up by now, scrambling and swearing.

But Chanty was doing neither. Even as he had fallen, he had rolled, ending up a dozen feet further on, shaded by the thickest cover available. There on his stomach and one elbow, with his right hand clutching the Colt he had ripped from its holster as he fell, he squinted around, with eyes as quick and glittering as a trapped hawk's.

There was nothing in sight anywhere, except old Coon, still standing disgusted, and Chanty's own hat, caught and held in the top of a bush. Then Chanty's more detailed inspection caught a faint wraith of white, almost fog-like, dissipating itself amid the scrub oak that clothed one of the highest rises across the gully a hundred yards away.

CHAPTER VIII.

HAND TO HAND.

THE continued sting at his neck reminded Chanty of something else; he put up his hand and brought it down blotched with blood from a nicking cut on his neck. As he looked at it, he swore for the first time.

"For a grown-up man who's been places and seen things, John Chanty, you shore acted like a damn fool! Ridin' along asleep, knowin' there was at least three fellows in a dozen miles itchin' for your scalp. You come outer that luckier'n you deserve—and a hell

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of a lot luckier'n that dry-gulcher across the way's goin' to come out!"

Twisting his head and shoulders without even stirring a single leaf or twig, he scanned the oak-clad ridge again. It was still as lifeless as ever.

"No amateur, that gent. He ain't where he was when that smoke bloomed—an' he ain't makin' no damn fool show of hisself out in the open, either, comin' to see if he finished his man or only put a bad hole in him. I'd figure him some forty-fifty feet away from that smoke puff by now—say, in that little head o' cedar over to the right—layin' low an' watchin' to see if I move or stay dead. That 'ud give him a clean sight o' where I fell, without old Coon bein' in the way . . . Well, if he ain't goin' to do no movin' 'round, I reckon it's up to me."

Still on his stomach, wriggling along like a snake and staying well back from the edge of the trail, Chanty worked up the gully. Fifty feet away there was a head-high clump of plum on the opposite side of the trail, where a little thicket in a draw came almost down to the road. Working well beyond until he had this between him and the suspected rifleman's position, Chanty crossed the trail there like a road runner and ducked into the shelter of the plum. A minute later he was creeping steadily up the draw, at the same time working gradually back toward the oak and cedar-clad knoll. He finally came onto this from almost directly behind.

As he had suspected, there was no one visible at the oak scrub where the first smoke had blossomed. For a full five minutes Chanty watched it, motionless, his eyes searching every inch of the visible brush.

Then his eye caught sight of a blue-jay, winging lazily up from the creek. As it neared the suspected clump of cedar, suddenly it swerved away and flapped off on a course at right angles.

Chanty grinned. "Uh-huh—so you are there, all right. You can fool man eyes, maybe, but you shore can't fool jaybird eyes. An' here's where you git paid for that crack at my neck."

Still from the rear he made his approach on the cedar knoll. The last fifty yards he covered on his stomach. Then at last he saw the ambusher—a sprawling figure, almost as motionless as the rock it lay behind. But the dull glint of the rifle barrel, the gray of the hat, the blue of the overalls, picked the living man out from the green and shadow of the young cedar.

"Uh-huh. Slim Howell, huh? I kinda thought it would be—Red's arm ain't quite fit for sneakin' around in the brush yet. Well, Slim, you shore oughtn't missed that shot."

CHANTY edged forward until he was scarcely a dozen feet away. Slowly he came to his hands and knees, then to one knee and one hand. The heavy Colt in his right hand hung muzzle-downward. He could shout now, and the would-be assassin would just have time to turn around, to make one startled grab for rifle or six-gun—to know the bullet was on its way toward his head or heart for that one awful hopeless instant before the bullet came. It was a fitting end for a dry-gulcher.

Chanty opened his mouth—and then closed it again. He started to creep forward once more. His boot scuffed lightly over a dry twig; it crackled. The rifleman whirled around like a man at a rattlesnake buzz.

Instead of shooting, Chanty drove forward in a headlong dive. He landed on the rifleman before that individ-

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ual could get his gun out of its holster. The impact drove the other sprawling a dozen feet from his rifle, and sent the two clawing and fighting like a pair of wild cats down the little slope beyond.

Here was no stand-up fight, with Chanty's speed and knowledge of boxing to help him. It was a regular "bear-rassle," with no holds barred. Chanty caught an elbow in the face at the same time that he drove his own knee into the other's stomach, bringing a grunt and gasp from that individual. He managed to get one damaging short jab into the face of Howell, smashing his mouth and lips, and then somehow the other man got a leverage against a little ledge of rock and broke free, rolling as he did so. He finished the roll on his hands and knees, grabbing for his holstered gun with lightning speed as he came up.

But in that second Chanty, also free, leaped at him again; and this time as Chanty came he swung the heavy Colt in his hand. The six-inch barrel caught Howell solidly across the temple, and with a gasping groan he crumpled up and fell in a sprawling heap.

Grimly Chanty examined him, making sure there was no shamming. Having reassured himself on this point, he looked around for the other's horse.

Down in a little draw a hundred yards back from the scene of the ambush, he found the rifleman's mount tied to a small tree. Mounting, he rode back to the scene of the fight. A minute later Chanty had securely bound the unconscious man's hands and feet with pieces of his own lasso, and then completed the job by fastening his neckerchief securely across the prisoner's face and mouth.

Slinging the bound and gagged man across the saddle and tying him there, belly down, Chanty swung up behind him and rode back to where old Coon still stood, "ground-tied," in the gully. Mounting Coon, he took the other horse in tow and set out up the gully once more.

But when he arrived at the road that branched north to the sheepman's headquarters, he stopped and pondered for a moment. Finally, instead of proceeding on to Anderson's as he had intended, he took the road to Eagle Rock instead. When he came close to town, in the early hours of darkness, he turned once more from the road and came up to the stable from the rear. Tying both Coon and the horse with the bound and helpless Howell, Chanty walked in through the back stable door.

RAFFERTY was sitting in his chair up at the front, whittling, just as Chanty had first seen him. The old stableman gave a grunt of surprise at sight of Chanty's cut and bruised face, and scrambled up out of his chair.

But Chanty only grinned. "You oughta see the other fellow," he said.

"Yeah? *Fellow?* Thought it was a wild cat, by the looks of you,' snorted the old stableman. "Who was it—or rather how many was it?"

"Only one," said Chanty, grinning. "But tell me—are there any of Anderson's gunmen in town now?"

Rafferty, his eyes still staring, shook his head. "No, there was some—Ace Connor and Red Rawlins and three-four others—but they just rode out again, minute or two 'fore you come. Seemed to be in sorter high spirits; even Red with his sore shoulder. Seemed like they had good news—or was expectin' good news or somethin'. Had a lot of drinks and left again. Funny you didn't see 'em."

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"I come in by the back way, so's I wouldn't see nobody I didn't want to see," said Chanty. "Well, if the street's clear, I'll go 'round and come in the front way. Be ready, will you—I want you to take a little *pasear* up the street with me."

A minute or two later he rode up to where Rafferty was waiting, leading the horse with the bound captive. Slim Howell, having come back to consciousness and found himself not only bruised and sore, but tied belly-down across a horse, was trying vainly to writhe loose from his bonds, at the same time making meaningless sounds behind his gag.

At sight of him, Rafferty almost fell over. "Holy Moses!" he yelled. "That's Slim Howell!"

"Yeah, I kinda suspected as much," said Chanty. "But don't you let on now and spoil my play. Whereabouts right now in this town would there be the biggest crowd, do you reckon?"

Still gaping, Rafferty finally managed to make a reasonable answer. "The Rawhide Saloon—most everybody drops in there 'bout this time for a little snort—even old Hankins, the storekeeper and postmaster. But what—"

"Don't ask questions; just come on an' find out," said Chanty, putting old Coon in motion once more.

With Rafferty hobbling frantically along behind trying to keep up, Chanty rode up to the brightly lighted front of the Rawhide, the largest saloon in town. As he dismounted in the full light, some one coming out of the saloon stopped, leaned forward to look, and then with a shout ran back into the saloon. A moment later almost a dozen men, all local townspeople or cowmen from the south ranches, came pouring out.

"By the Lord—a dead man!" sang out somebody.

BUT Chanty, standing in the light, his hand in handy position to his gun, shook his head. "Nope, gents," he said, "not dead. Just crazy. I'm taking him back to his home. Anybody here recognize the pore fellow?"

"Crazy—?" The spectator, who had moved closer to inspect the supposed corpse, suddenly let out a yelp. "Hell, that ain't no crazy man! That's Slim Howell—one of Anderson's men!"

"Oh, no," insisted Chanty solemnly. "You may be right about his name, but I know he's crazy all right. Caught him out in them scrub oak, close to the Crazy Horse ford. Crazy as a cross-eyed hydrophoby skunk. Why, he was shootin' at knot holes or somethin' floatin' in the air—so crazy he didn't even notice there was people passin' on the road.

"He missed a knot hole an' skinned my neck—come nigh to bustin' me plumb center. Naturally I stepped off an' roped him—an' the pore fellow fought like a wild cat. Yep—crazy as a centipede. I managed to git him tied on his hoss an' started to ride in here to take him home. I figured from the brand on his hoss he belonged at King Anderson's."

"Shootin' at knot holes—!" "Crazy—!" "Almost busted you plum-center—!" Some one began to laugh. It was the saloon keeper.

"He shore looks wild, all right—crazy enough to bite hisself! Only he ain't crazy—he's just mad! Mad 'cause he missed you with that shot! Tried to dry-gulch you, did he? Hell, what for did you bring him in? Whyn't you just swing him up to a tree limb, instead?"

But Chanty shook his head. "Nope

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—you can't hold a crazy man accountable like you would a ordinary human. So I gotta take him on back to his outfit. I just stopped to leave somethin' with the postmaster in his safe. Is he here?"

An elderly man with a long white beard and mustache came forward. "I'm him," he said. "Hankins—run the store an' post office. What you want to leave in the safe?"

"This," said Chanty, reaching inside his shirt and bringing out a thick package. "There's four thousand dollars here—you can count it, you an' the saloon keeper here, if you want to. But I just want to leave it with you till to-morrow or next day. Money to pay off the mortgage King Anderson took on the Lazy S."

He passed the package over to the storekeeper who took it gingerly. Then Chanty swung back into his saddle again and caught up the reins. "Well, I gotta be hurryin', if I aim to get this fellow to his bed 'fore too late. May be some chance for him now, but if he gits moon-struck on top of it, he'll be a goner for sure."

"Hold on!" yelped Rafferty. "You ain't really goin' out there? By yourself? Hell, wait till I saddle a hoss an' I'll come with you!"

But Chanty was already riding. He turned to call back. "Nope — never mind. I ain't aimin' to stop there only a minute. See you *mañana*."

CHAPTER IX.

ANDERSON'S SCHEME.

THE road to King Anderson's lay plain before Chanty as he rode in the night, its hoof-beaten bareness like a gray streak across the earth. Chanty rode at a steady pace, Slim Howell's horse with Slim tied helpless across him nosed close on a short rope. On the top of a ridge just a couple of hundred yards from the ranch house he drew rein and studied the ground before him.

Different from those of the early comers to the valley who had built on commanding hilltops, Anderson's ranch buildings lay sprawling in a well-grassed hollow where an unfailing spring bubbled up its clear waters. Bunk house, stable and other outbuildings lay dark and lifeless, but from one wing of the sprawling ranch house a light gleamed.

With Slim Howell's horse still leading close, Chanty rode boldly down to the ranch, circled to the corral at the left and rear, and there tied both horses. Then on foot he approached the house. Loud voices, the clink of bottles and laughter helped drown his footsteps as he tiptoed up the steps.

King Anderson was in the big front room of the ranch house, sitting across the table from Ace Connor himself. Evidently Ace had come directly back from Eagle after all. There was a bottle on the table, and both men were drinking from glasses. The lamplight fell on Anderson's big ruthless face, and on the countenance of his foreman.

"Don't you—*hic*—worry," said the foreman. "Shlim Howell's out there—an' Shlim don' miss. He'sh prob'ly already got thish—*hic*—Buddy Smith. An' if he ain't, th' othersh are there by now, an' they'll help. Ain't no Buddy goin' get pash *that* bunch."

"Yes—but what if he don't ride in to-night?" said the ranch owner shortly. "He ain't *acted* so much like a damn fool, so far. And only a damn fool 'u'd be ridin' around alone thisaway, with money on him—especially after what's happened lately."

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"Well, he'sh gotta come in shome-time, ain't he?" demanded Connor. "Mortgage gotta be paid in Eagle day after to-morrow, ain't it? Thash what Shlim's out there waitin' for—gonta dry-gulch him, if he ridesh in. If he don' ride in—mortgage don' get paid. Then what?"

"Sheep," said Anderson. "Ten minutes after time's up, I'm goin' to throw ten thousand sheep across the creek. I'm goin' to have the county sheriff here to see 'em safe over; he's got to protect me on my own land. Then let's see them damn South Valley cowmen fire on the sheriff, if they dare. We'll not only have the guns to beat 'em, but we'll have the law on our side too. All I want is to get ten-twenty thousan' sheep pastured on that side, once."

CONNOR laughed huskily, winked an owlish eye. "You ol' fox," he said. "But you can' fool me. I know. Know you couldn't run sheep there more'n three-four yearsh. Then all sheeped out. Hell, ain't I seen sheep ruin range before. Eat all th' grassh—ruin all the roots. I'm tellin' yer—thish valley here only good for cowsh over long time."

"Who the hell said anything about 'long time'?" demanded Anderson. "Sheep won't ruin the roots in three-four years. But what happens to the cows over there durin' them three-four years?"

"Huh! Cows go plum to hell," snorted the half drunk foreman. "Not enough grass, cowsh starve. An' cowsh don' like sheep, neither; don't like shmell of 'em. Won't graze where sheep been; won't drink outa tank after sheep drunk. Don' blame 'em—dam' shtinkin' sheep!"

"Yeah—but that's just what I got 'em for," said Anderson. "Where'll the cowmen over there be, in three or four years? Broke! They'll have to sell—an' sell for what I offer 'em. Just like happened on this side the creek. Then when I've got the whole valley, I'll sell every damn sheep—make money on' em, too. Then I'll run cows in the whole valley again—I'll be the biggest cattle owner north o' Luis Terrazas, in Mexico."

"Huh?" For a moment the red-faced foreman stared. Then he slowly put his glass down. "You *are* fox!" he said, almost soberly. "Cows again, huh? I mighta knowed it! Hell, no reg'lar cowman c'u'd ever shtand to be real sheepman. *Ha-ha-ha—!*" Suddenly he began to laugh, drunkenly uproarious.

"What's the matter with you—gone crazy?" snarled the ranch owner angrily. "What's so funny all to once?"

"You bein' sheepman!" gasped the foreman. "Jus' got thinkin' about ten yearsh ago—an' that night in the bottomsh. 'Member? You wash'n sheepman, then. Nosshir! You—"

"Shut up!" The ranch owner had suddenly reared up from his chair; his hand had gone out and swept the bottle from the table. Now the ranchman towered over the foreman, bottle uplifted, deadly rage contorting his features.

"I told you I'd kill you if you ever let anything of that out. Do you hear me? Even to me! Now, what was it you were going to say about *'ten years ago'?*"

Before that fearful giant figure, the foreman shrank back in his chair. "N-n-nothin'," he stammered in terror. "I wasn' goin' say nothin'! Nothin' at all. I swear—"

"You better remember," said the

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ranch owner slowly putting the bottle down.

But the foreman still eyed him fearfully, dubiously. After a moment Connor got up, put his own glass, only half empty, back on the table. "I—I better go—look, shee if Howell's back yet," he said. "Time he oughta be here by now."

He turned toward the door, then stopped dead still, eyes agape, mouth wide open.

"YES, he's here," said a voice from the dark beyond the open porch door. And into the doorway Chanty stepped, and stood lounging there, half smiling in that mirthless way of his, his thumb hooked in his belt just over the low-slung butt of his holstered gun.

"My God—ish Buddy! Ish Buddy Smith!" cried the foreman dazedly. He made a gesture toward his own belt.

Like a flash of light the Colt jumped from Chanty's holster, swung to cover both the foreman and King Anderson. "Keep your hands up and away from that gun, Connor, if you want to die of old age," said Chanty sharply. "The same for you, Anderson—though if you want to try your luck, that'll be all right with me, too."

But the sheepman made no move toward the gun holstered at his own hip. Instead he stared for a long silent moment at his uninvited visitor. His black glittering eyes swept Chanty from head to foot. Then a bleak smile came to his lips. "Well, seeing you've come to visit—won't you help yourself to a drink?" He nodded toward the bottle.

But Chanty shook his head; his eyes did not leave the two men before him for an instant. "No, thanks. You see, I never drink with a man I know I may have to kill."

The foreman blinked his watery eyes. "But—how'd you get here?" he asked dazedly. "I—I thought—"

"You thought Slim Howell was going to stop me, maybe?" said Chanty, completing the sentence with a crooked grin. "Well, Slim didn't. Instead he just up and come along with me."

"Huh?" stammered the foreman. "Then he—he didn't—"

But he got no further. The heavy-jowled sheepman cut him short with a snarled order. "Shut up, Connor!" Then, turning to Chanty again, "You didn't come here just to refuse a drink. What did you come for?"

"To talk to you about that mortgage," said Chanty tersely. "I just came to tell you that it 'll be paid on the dot at Hankins's store, any time between now and day after to-morrow that you want to call for the money. Hankins has it in his safe, and he and Rafferty 'ull have authority to pay it over and take back the mortgage. And"—he half grinned again that mirthless grin of his—"I would not bother about getting any sheep ready to throw across the Crazy Horse, Anderson. Not day after to-morrow, or any time. You know McMurdo's deadline. Stay on your side of it.

"And now I'm going to be leaving. I—I'd kind of consider it rude if you followed too close after me out the door. You can untie Slim Howell after I'm gone—you'll find him tied on his horse out back at the corral."

With his gun muzzle still trained on them, Chanty slowly began to back his way across the porch, feeling behind him with his foot before each step. When he felt the edge of the porch under his foot, he gave a sudden leap sideways out of the light and off the porch, whirled and immediately began

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running at full speed around the house toward the corral.

FOR a moment there was silence inside. Then a great bellowing roar. "He's gone! After him, Connor! Get him! Don't let him get away!" Feet thudded on the porch planks; an echoing uproar broke out in the bunk house.

Chanty, swinging up into his saddle as old Coon nervously spun around, laughed. He touched Coon with the spur and whirled away in the darkness.

At the thud of his horse's hoofs, a gun flamed in the night at the corner of the bunk house; the bullet whistled thirty feet behind Chanty as he cut across the empty meadow toward the road.

Turning in his saddle, Chanty flung a chance bullet back at the direction of the gun flash, and then thumbed three rapid rounds at the door of the bunk house which had suddenly sprung into light. From that direction immediately came a howl of pain, and then the light went out with a crash as some one there yelled:

"Put out that light, you damn fool! Want to get us all potted right in the door?"

Chanty laughed again and rode on. After a few minutes he stopped to listen.

But there was no sound of pursuing hoofs on the night air. The ranch house had leaped into full light, now, and from that direction rose a tumult of voices and shouts.

But ten minutes later, stopping again to listen on his steady gallop back toward town, Chanty suddenly jerked his horse off the road. From the direction of town had come the thud of galloping horses traveling at top speed.

Over the sound of the thudding hoofs came a voice, arguing. "What I say, is, that we ride straight in on top of 'em! And if they've done anything to Buddy—"

It was the voice of Jack Burtis, the young watcher of the ford. Chanty swung back toward the road again, calling out as he did so. "Burtis! McMurdo! It's me—Buddy Smith!"

Within another minute he was among them. Besides Burtis, there was McMurdo himself, and half a dozen other punchers from the cow ranches of the South Valley.

"Much obliged for coming," Chanty said. "I suppose Burtis brought you. I told him not to bother."

"He's a damned young fool—and you're another," said the dour old Scotchman shortly. "Think we got nothing to do but ride around at night, getting young scatterbrains out of the trouble they ride into—huh?"

Chanty let it pass. "You see, I had to come out to Anderson's," he said mildly. "About the mortgage—and also to carry Slim Howell home."

"Slim Howell! What the hell you talkin' about?" roared the gaunt Scotchman.

"Well, I had to knock him cold with a gun barrel, so it was up to me then to see he got home all right, wasn't it?" retorted Chanty. And he went on to tell in a few words what had happened.

McMURDO listened grimly, and grunted when Chanty was through. "You oughta killed him when you had a chance. You're goin' to have to now, certain. Takin' him through town like that, makin' a laughing stock out of him—he'll be like a mad wolf, until he evens it up in blood."

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"I did it on purpose," said Chanty. "Everybody here seems to be figgering this is just between the ranchers and Anderson's sheepmen. They're leaving out the townspeople entirely. And there's quite a lot of them—Rafferty, Hankins, the saloon men, and the rest of them. If they throw in on our side we'll have about as many guns even as Anderson's sheepmen. And getting them to laugh at Anderson's killers is the surest way to win them over, get them on our side."

"Yeah—mebbe," said the Scotchman skeptically. "But leaving a wolf like Howell run loose is something else. He's liable to be so mad he'll take it out on the next cowman he meets, regardless—shoot him down in cold blood . . . Well, we might as well go home, I guess."

That was not all the talk for that night, however. When Chanty rode into the Lazy S, slipped bridle and saddle off and turned his horse into the corral, and then tiptoed into the house, he thought he did so unheard.

Finding the room that Mollie Smith had said was his, at the end of the hall, was easy enough. But scarcely had he closed his door and lighted the lamp when there was a knock at the door. He opened it. Outside, standing in the yellow lamplight, her hair down her back and a cloak wrapped close around her, stood Mollie Smith. Her face was anxious, and her big eyes met his with something in them that sent queer feelings up and down Chanty's spine.

"I—I've been worrying about you all night!" she said. "Lying awake—waiting for you! When you didn't come for supper—"

Chanty looked at her a long moment while his fingers tightened on the doorknob. "I'm all right!" he said tersely. "Just rode into town—on a little bit of business. You go back to bed. And stop worrying about me."

"But—but Buddy! If anything were to happen—"

"I said, go back to sleep!"

At that she went, smiling suddenly at his rudeness, yet seeming entirely satisfied.

Behind her Chanty watched until she had vanished inside a room further along the hall, and until he had heard the door close softly behind her.

Then slowly he went to bed. As he unfastened his heavy belt with its holstered gun, he suddenly stopped and looked at it intently. He slipped the heavy blue-barreled weapon out until the lamplight glinted on its ugly shine. He stared at it for a long moment.

Then suddenly he jammed it back in its holster with a hoarse oath.

CHAPTER X.

CHANTY'S GRAVE.

NEXT morning, at breakfast, Mollie Smith seemed to have completely forgotten the incident of the night before. But when, a half hour later, Chanty had saddled his horse and was just swinging up into the saddle, to his surprise and perturbation, the girl herself rode around the corner of the barn. During the half hour she had changed to a very practical but trim costume of flannel shirt, trousers and boots, that set off her slender figure to good advantage. She grinned openly at Chanty's surprised stare.

"You don't sneak off this morning like you did yesterday," she said as she swung her horse alongside his. "I've been waiting for you—I had it all figured out in advance."

"I've got a lot of hard riding to do,"

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said Chanty rudely. "Got to ride the brush all along the creek—want to look over the lay of the land there. And that won't be any fun for you."

"Oh, won't it?" she retorted. "Why I'll bet I've ridden that creek bottom more than you have, smarty!"

She touched her horse with the spur, and whirled away toward the creek. Chanty, with a frown furrowing his brows, followed. On the ride he was glad he had tricked old Rafferty into talking on so endlessly about old days on the Lazy S, and its range, and hands. He was able not only to play up to the steady stream of chatter from Mollie but also to make seemingly casual references to the country and incidents which only one born and brought up among them would presumably have known. Only once or twice did he have to thumb old Coon slyly to make him act up and thus give him opportunity to shift conversation from some dangerous or embarrassing turn.

"I know what you want to come down here for," said the girl as they swung parallel to the stream at the ford. "You want to see where are the places that King Anderson can cross his sheep. Don't you?"

"Yes — that and other things." Chanty watched approvingly as she turned her mount directly into the brush lining the stream, picking her way quickly and unerringly.

"Well, he can cross 'em at our ford back there—that's the best place. Or he can cross them higher up, near Schomberg's. These are the only places."

"You seem to know a lot about it, for a girl," said Chanty, his eye sweeping the creek and its bushy banks.

"Why shouldn't I? I ride this way a lot. It's so much prettier here under the cottonwoods than it is out on the bare hills. And I love to hear the ripple of the water, too."

They rode on. But Chanty's gaze, constantly wandering, was searching the brush and openings on their side of the stream as much as the opposite bank.

And then all at once they rode out into a little opening, where the bottom flat had widened out, and the plum and aspen had spread further away from the actual stream. There was a tiny trickling flow of water across this little open valley, and Chanty, looking to see where it came from, caught sight of a rock-walled spring. He started to ride that way, and then suddenly drew his horse to a dead stop.

SQUARELY in front of him, in the very center of the little glade, there rose a little grass covered mound. Its telltale length would have marked it for what it was even if it had not been for the wooden headboard and footboard. And at the four corners stakes had been set and two strands of wire stretched around to keep cattle from stepping on it.

"It's where they buried the sheepman—the man that was killed," said Mollie, reining up beside him.

Chanty did not answer. His face was like a carving from marble, so still and expressionless had it become. Only his eyes moved, glancing a few feet further on to another little mound that now seemed to have once been the location of a fire. Amid the slight red gray of the scattered ashes was a round rusty object—evidently at one time the iron tire of a wagon.

"They buried him—right where they killed him," he said at last in a slow toneless voice. "That over there is the burned wagon. But—but who

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fixed it up like this—the boards—the wire—?"

"I did," answered the girl. "I found it, riding here one day. And—he'd never done anything to me. I brought the boards and wire, and fixed it to keep the cows from stepping on it. It seemed so—so indecent, almost, not to."

Chanty swung from the saddle, leaving the reins hanging over Coon's head. He walked up to the little fenced enclosure and stood looking down at the tall board at the far end. On it in neat printed letters was the terse inscription, "William Chanty — died 1888."

"And you did it—the fence. and the headboard? Who told you—what to put on it?"

"Rafferty."

"He did? Rafferty? What else did he tell you?" Chanty was still looking at the board at the head of the grave, but his face was bleak as frost-riven granite.

"Just what every one knows, I reckon—and that isn't much. This old man Chanty came here, where old Wolfer Wilkins had been allowed to homestead for clearing the valley of cats and lobos. Wilkins sold him the place right enough, but he claimed later he didn't know he was selling to a sheepman. And when this Chanty tried to bring in sheep, the cowmen did like they've done in lots of other places to save the cow country—they raided him and his sheep."

"Raided him! At dead of night!" said Chanty bitterly. For the first time he turned and looked at her. "It's on Lazy S land. Do you think—Lazy S men did it?"

She looked at him, troubled. "I—I don't know. It seems to be a sworn secret. Nobody talks about it. But I don't believe—I can't believe dad had anything to do with it. He might have agreed to raiding the sheep—most cowmen would. But killing an old man—no, I can't believe dad would have agreed to that."

Some of the steely hardness seemed to depart momentarily from Chanty's features. Then it came back again as he turned and looked at the rusty hoop across the mound of ashes. When he spoke it was as if he were talking to himself more than to her. "Down on the Cimarron I ran across a man who had trapped with Wolfer Wilkins in the Siskiyous one year. And during the winter they got drunk one Christmas—and Wolfer told him something about what happened here. According to Wolfer, this man Chanty was an Easterner—a dairyman or something—who had come West for his health. Some one had told him a man could take up a homestead and make a living with a small flock of sheep. He could tend 'em himself on foot—wouldn't need a horse, or punchers, like he would for cows. He didn't even know how cattlemen felt toward sheep—just bought the homestead and a few hundred sheep, and brought them in. And then one night they—raided him."

The girl had listened with eyes widening with slow horror. "Oh—how awful. That's worse than—murder!"

"Yes—and on Lazy S range! Almost at the front door, you might say."

But the girl turned toward him furiously. "Don't you say it—like that! I don't care what happened—what people say! I know dad could never have done it."

"But he knows who did it!"

"Yes, I think he does—*now*. And I—I think he's sworn not to tell. But I know he didn't do it!" She suddenly

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swung herself back into her saddle and turned away. "Come on—let's ride from here. This place is giving me the creeps somehow, to-day."

FOR ten miles, almost to the head of the valley, they rode the creek. And Chanty found, even as the girl had said, that almost the whole way the banks were either so steep, or so thickly covered with alder and plum and other brush that the crossing over of any appreciable number of sheep would be a matter of days, rather than hours. There was no chance for a surprise crossing anywhere except at the two known fords.

The Schomberg ford, up at the head of the valley, was an easy crossing, though, just like the one between the Lazy S and town. Also it was nearer the King Anderson headquarters on the opposite side of the Crazy Horse, and hence doubly dangerous. After inspecting it closely, Chanty rode up to the ranch where the good-natured old German received them gladly and invited them to stay and eat.

Schomberg had always lived at peace with his neighbors, and intended to try to continue to do so. He advocated conferences between the leading ranchers and the sheepmen, to see if peaceful arrangements could not be made.

Elliott, his weather-beaten old foreman, however, was openly derisive of any such attempt. "They ain't sheepherders even—those men of Anderson's," he snorted. "They ain't nothing but killers. And we won't get no peace till all the honest folks in the valley — both cattlemen and townfolk —get together and run them killers out."

That was as far as the matter got. Chanty left in mid-afternoon, with no further understanding with Schomberg, but feeling that in Elliott and the Schomberg cowhands themselves he had allies who could be trusted to the last ditch.

Back at the Lazy S he had hardly sat down to talk with old Anse Smith, who was eagerly waiting for him on the porch, when Rafferty rode up. The stablekeeper stumped up on the porch and drew out of his pocket a folded paper.

"There you are, Buddy! Anderson come in to-day and took his money. I made him write a canceling receipt of payment in full across the face of this, in front of Hankins and a couple others, and then rode out to give it to you. Reckon you'd better burn it up, hey?"

Quickly Chanty opened the paper up, read it. It was the mortgage, and as Rafferty had said, marked "Paid in Full." Carefully Chanty struck a match and, lighting a corner of it, held it until it burned to the last fragment.

"That's finished, anyway," he said. "Anderson have anything to say?"

"Nary a say. Just looked at me like I was something the coyotes drug in."

"He hasn't given up yet," said Chanty. "He'll lay low until he can think up some new trickery. Did Slim Howell come in with him?"

The stableman shook his head. "Nope; only Ace Connor was with him. But Slim Howell was in by hisself afterwards. Ugly as hell. He's a killer, that Howell fellow — and he's drinking hisself into a killin' fit. I ain't goin' to feel easy till some one shoots all the devilment outa him with a sawed-off shotgun."

"What do town people say?" inquired Chanty thoughtfully.

"They ain't sayin' anything—much. But they're lookin' a heap. Lookin' a

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heap like they're beginnin' to get sick of Howell and all the rest of Anderson's killers. Old man Hankins even took down a long hank of rope and looked at it, after Howell rode away, mighty meaning like."

At that moment Mollie Smith came out, looking as fresh and rosy as if she had just gotten up. "Supper's ready," she announced. "And hot biscuits and wild plum jam—you're just in time, Rafferty."

"Lemme at it," said the old stableman, jumping up with a yelp. He banged Chanty on the back. "You an' me better make the best o' them biscuits while we got a chance, Buddy! Some o' these days some fellow that's got real judgment is goin' to come along and rope Mollie out for hisself and take her off the home range. An' then you an' me and your dad here are goin' to know what we'll be missin'."

He slapped Chanty on the back again as he turned toward the door.

Chanty felt a sudden and almost irresistible desire to kick the old stableman all the way back to Eagle Rock.

CHAPTER XI.

UNMASKED.

IT was the young McMurdo puncher, Burtis, who brought the next disturbing news. He stepped in on his way from the Bar M one morning as he often did now, ostensibly to talk a bit with Chanty, though Chanty suspected that Mollie was the real attraction.

"Anderson's got a new gunman in—sorter substitutin' for Red Howell, till Howell gets over that busted wing you give him, Buddy. Fellow from down Brazos way, too, so Rafferty says. Thought you'd maybe know him."

"Gunfighter from down Brazos way—!" Chanty suddenly sat up. "What's his name?"

"Leroo—Franswah Leroo, or somethin' like that. One o' them furriners with a funny soundin' name. Not Spanish, anyway. You know him?"

Chanty did not answer; his eyes were looking out across the range, out toward that low brush line in the distance that marked the line of the Crazy Horse. "Yeah—I've heard of him," he said at last. "Little dark fellow—French Canadian, from up North, one time—shoots left handed. That him?"

Burtis nodded. "That's him, just the way Rafferty told it. Seems he's a real bad man—got a rep almost big as that fellow Chanty's. Me, I'm hopin' all o' that ain't so. Be kinda bad for us, if it was."

Chanty slowly took his feet down from off the bannisters where he had them propped. Almost by accident his fingers seemed to touch his gun-butt in passing, shake it looser in its holster.

"He *is* bad—that fellow LeRoux—if it's the same LeRoux I've heard tell of. If it *is* the one, Anderson must be figurin' on a real move. Things will be comin' fast now."

But Chanty was thinking, not merely of Anderson and the sheep-and-cattle troubles, but of himself as well. For him too the showdown was coming—coming fast. He had felt it even before now. LeRoux's coming only made it more certain. For not only did he know LeRoux, the French Canadian gunman, but LeRoux knew him; knew him by sight; knew that he was, not Buddy Smith, but John Chanty himself.

But after all it would only hasten things a bit. Ever since his first ride with the girl, almost two weeks earlier,

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Chanty had known that his masquerade could not continue long. She was too keen witted to be fooled for long; her questions, her swift allusions to incidents of their earlier childhood, were too quick for Chanty. They came on him like lightning from a clear sky, almost—gave him no time to get prepared, to think up the right answer.

Sometimes he wondered just how much she believed him. There had been that time, for instance, when after they had come back to the corral and dismounted, she had stopped and looked at him searchingly for a long moment.

"Do you know, I am just beginning to realize how much you have changed, Buddy. Sometimes I don't think I know you now at all. You seem so silent—so stern—so different." After that Chanty had fled for safety to the bunk house.

But it was not possible to avoid her entirely. She cut across his path time after time, out on the range, and then there was nothing to do but let her ride along with him if she chose.

THE coming of the Canadian, LeRoux, would change all that. It would bring things to a focus—to a final showdown. And when that was over, Chanty would ride away again—if he lived to ride away. He should have ridden away weeks before—the day after he had come here, in fact.

And riding away from Mollie Smith, he knew now, would not be easy. Yet it was the only thing to be done. It had to be done. A gunman—a man who had followed the gun trail, as he had done—has no place in his life for women. There would be nothing but sorrow and heartaches along that trail for women like Mollie Smith. And once on the gun trail, no man can turn back. It is a trail with no turning, no ending except that of the gun.

Yes, he, John Chanty, should have ridden on weeks ago. Even if he had had to give over the undertaking that had in the first place headed him this way.

All this came to Chanty as he walked out in front with Burtis when the Bar M puncher left. As the cowpuncher rode away, Chanty stood there looking after him, rolling a cigarette unconsciously as he pondered Burtis's news.

All at once he heard footsteps behind him. He wheeled about. It was Mollie Smith. And her face was as sober as his own.

"I heard what Jack Burtis told you—about a new gunman coming to join Anderson," she said simply. "And what you said about him being—a bad man. Do you mean he's an awfully dangerous fighter—or what?"

Chanty grunted. "This new one just sounds worse, maybe, because he is from off, and foreign too. And left-handed. Every left-handed gunman I ever heard tell of was supposed to be deadlier'n any *two* right-handed gunmen. Though I never heard any that proved up as such."

"But *you* think this LeRoux is dangerous—I know by the way you talked," said the girl. "But even so, it's bad enough—Connor and Howell and those others. It's bound to come to it, some day. Fighting, I mean. And then a lot of good men will be killed. Like Schomberg—and dad—and Burtis."

Burtis! He caught her hesitation over that name. So that was how it was, huh? She was worried over Burtis. Well, why shouldn't she be? Burtis was a nice clean young fellow. A damn sight better man for any woman than a man who rode the gun trail.

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"Mebbe some good men 'll be killed—and mebbe not," he said noncommittally. "If King Anderson was to get killed, I reckon that 'ud just about fix everything up pretty."

"But it mustn't happen—it shan't happen!" she said suddenly. "Our men getting killed—like that. I—I'll stop it myself!"

"*You'll* stop it?" Chanty looked at her in amazement. "What do you mean?"

"Just that," she said. "If he gets what he wants he'll send away his gunfighters. He told me he would. And what he wants is—me."

Chanty suddenly reached out, grabbed her arm. His eyes blazed like live coals between the narrowed lids. "What are you talking about? Are you crazy?"

She shook her head, though she made no effort to pull away. "If things keep on as they are, there'll be fighting, and lots of good men will die. It won't help them any if some of Anderson's gunmen die too. But if I go to King Anderson and tell him I'll marry him, he'll send away his killers, and there'll be no deaths on our side of the valley. So that's what I'm going to do—marry King Anderson—"

SHE got no further. Chanty was standing over her, his hands clutching her shoulders so that she almost cried out with the pain.

"You little fool!" he said hoarsely. "I believe you'd do it, too! Well, listen to me. Ride over there if you want to—tell him you'll marry him, if you want to. But tell him, while you're about it, that you'll be a widow before night of the day he marries you. Tell him I said so! Tell him that John Cha—"

He broke off short, turned away. And she looked at him amazedly.

"*John?*" she repeated. "What was that name? What was it you said?"

"Nothing," he rasped. "Go on and 'tend to your business in the house. And don't let me hear of you doing anything crazy—like going to Anderson's. Do you hear me?"

All at once she smiled, though had his gaze been as keen as usual he would have noticed the hot flush crimsoning her cheeks, the excited shrillness of her voice.

"I fooled you that time, didn't I, Mister Smarty? You thought I meant it! Why, don't you remember the time, when I was a kid of ten, and fooled you into thinking I was going to elope with the station agent's boy? And how you licked him in a fight and chased him all the way home till he hid on the roof of the station?"

Chanty gave a deep breath of relief. His eyes widened, became more normal looking. "Sure I remember.—Made him climb on the station roof—that's right."

"And do you remember how you kept him there all evening?"

"Yeah," said Chanty, his gaze still on the line of the Crazy Horse and, beyond it, the slopes over which lay King Anderson's ranch. "I remember that—" And only then did he realize how far he had fallen into the trap she had set.

"You're not Buddy! You're not Buddy!" she cried. "I felt it—I knew it! There wasn't any agent's boy—there wasn't any play at elopement—there never was anything like that! Who are you? And *where is Buddy?*"

He looked at her, startled—looked into her wild, questioning eyes. He opened his mouth, licked his dry lips.

"Yes, where is Buddy?" she cried again, almost a scream. "What have you done with Buddy?"

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And when he still did not speak, she read the answer in his face. "You mean he's—*dead!*" she whispered, and tottered as she spoke.

ONLY Chanty's arms, catching her, stopped her from falling. For minutes he held her there, while her body shook with sobs. And he, John Chanty, who never had looked twice at any woman before, found himself with a strange desire to reach down and stroke that head comfortingly. But all that he did was to hold her until her first grief had cried itself out.

Then he talked, in short sentences, broken up, telling as little of the tale as he could.

"Buddy died—on his way here. The money he was bringing home—some saloon toughs tried to take it from him. He fought—and they got him. Before he died, I promised I'd bring it here in his place."

"But—But why did you pretend to be—*him?*"

"That was Rafferty's mistake," said Chanty. "He saw your brother's knife that I was bringing home with his belongings, and he mistook me for him. Then that first night—you were so happy at his being home—I couldn't ruin it for you by telling you the truth. After that—after I met King Anderson like I did—it seemed like somebody was needed here in Buddy's place. So I let you keep on thinking it. I was wrong—I should have told you."

"Oh, it was cruel of you!" she cried.

"I know," he said. "But after it's over—the trouble with Anderson—I'll ride on away again, and you won't be bothered with me any more."

But, illogically enough, she caught at his sleeve as she looked up at him through tear-reddened eyes. "Why should you ride away? If you were a friend of my brother's, you are certainly welcome in his home—especially coming for him as you did. And you've never even told me your name yet—."

But Chanty shook his head. "Don't ask me that! It doesn't matter—won't matter after I'm gone. And I've got to ride on; I can't stay here!"

And then all at once he saw her eyes widen with understanding, horror. "*John— John Chanty!*" she said. "That was what you started to say just now! That's who you are. John Chanty—the gunman—the killer! And Buddy was with you—!"

"Buddy wasn't with me, then. And don't you call me a *killer.* A gunman I've been, yes. But I've not been a killer!"

Still she shrank back from him. "I heard of you—in range wars—nester wars—wherever there was fighting. A traveling gunman—just like Anderson's men, Connor, and Howell, and Rawlins!"

"Not like them—Good Lord, not like them!" cried Chanty hoarsely. He threw up his hand, pointed down toward the brush and cottonwoods that marked the Crazy Horse. "If I'm a gunman, you made me what I am! Your father and your cowmen friends! They shot my father down, there, like they would a dog, before my eyes. Shot at me as I ran, a terrified kid of fifteen, into the brush! That's why I turned gunman!

"When I was big enough to handle a gun, I swore to kill every man like those raiders I could. And I found them—men like Connor and Rawlins and Howell—men who hired out their guns to big ranchers to kill off smaller ranchers—men who hired out with cowmen to kill off homesteaders—

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nesters. There wasn't a one I killed who didn't deserve killing!"

THERE was puzzlement in her eyes now, as well as shock. "But—but why did you come here? You didn't come here just for Buddy—"

Chanty shook his head. "No. I was already on my way here when I met your—brother. I was on my way back to finish the thing that had started me out, ten years ago. But when I met you—and when I saw how you had fixed up *his* grave—"

He stopped; he could not go on. Her eyes were regarding him now, not with horror, but pity—could he have seen it. But his eyes were fixed away there on the concealing cottonwoods of the Crazy Horse in the distance.

"Yes, I'm John Chanty—Chanty, the gunman. The man a dozen gunfighters would come riding in here tomorrow to kill, if they only knew I was here—"

Neither one of them heard the pounding gallop of the approaching horse until it was almost upon them. Like a thunderbolt it rushed up, stopping only at the last moment as the rider jerked it to a sliding halt that sent its haunches back into the dust.

And then the rider was yelling his message to the two in front of him.

"Schomberg—he's dead! Killed! Shot down like a dog by that killer of Anderson's!"

"Schomberg—killed!" Chanty put out his hand and caught the other's bridle reins just as the rider was about to jerk his mount around again. "Who killed him? Which killer of Anderson's shot him?"

"That hellion Slim Howell! He come into the Eagle Rock drunk, looking for somebody to kill! Some cowman! Schomberg was the first one he saw—and Schomberg didn't even have a gun! But that hellion shot him down anyway—and then claimed he thought Schomberg was reaching in his shirt for a hid-out gun! It was dirty murder, if ever there was one! I'm going to get the boys now. Will you tell McMurdo and your men?"

"Yes, I'll tell them," said Chanty grimly, turning loose the reins. "While you're about it, ride out to Bates, and tell him, too. Tell 'em all to gather at the Lazy S as soon as they can—by mid-afternoon at latest. We'll all ride in together from here."

In an instant the rider was gone, spurring his horse to still greater speed.

Chanty was conscious then of the girl clutching at his sleeve. "What are you going to do?" she demanded in a thin shrill voice.

"We're going to run down that killer like the mad dog he is," said Chanty grimly. "It's my fault, anyway—he shot Schomberg because I wasn't there for him to shoot."

"But they'll be waiting for you—they'll shoot you from a dry-gulch! You can't go!"

"Shut up—and get in the house," said Chanty rudely. "This is a man's game—no place for a woman. Go inside, I tell you! You've got your own job looking out for your father."

And oddly enough, without a word she turned meekly and obeyed.

CHAPTER XII.

A TRICKY RUSE.

CHANTY rode straight to Eagle Rock, and the first man he saw there was Rafferty, hobbling toward him and swinging his arms and cursing. "Where's the boys? Where's

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the rest of you?" he yelped as Chanty swung up alone. "Are ye goin' to let the dirty killer get away?"

But Chanty walked up and caught the old stableman and shook him. "They'll be along d'rectly. Shut up your yelping and answer me. Where is Howell?"

"Gone. Gone back toward the sheep ranch!" sputtered the old man. "Him and four others that was along. Over an hour ago. They'll be back home almost by now. Oh, the dirty murderin' dogs!"

But Chanty was no longer listening. He had mounted and was already heading out of town again, toward the Anderson ranch. "If I don't get back first, tell the rest of 'em I've gone to Anderson's," he called back to the gaping stableman. "Tell 'em to come along after—and bring plenty of cartridges."

All the town, Chanty noticed as he rode through it, was buzzing with excitement. A little crowd was gathered around the Rawhide Saloon where the dead man lay. Men were crossing and recrossing the street; Chanty saw with surprise that they all wore belts and holstered guns, or else carried rifles.

Hankins, the white-haired storekeeper, came out almost in front of Chanty's horse, and joined the crowd at the Rawhide. Incongruously enough he was carrying a long coil of rope in his hands, and around his belt was strapped an old latigo into which was thrust a tremendously long old horse pistol of the early Colt days. With his stooped frame and long snowy beard he looked like a patriarch; but there was a grimness about his face that forbade any thought of humor at the incongruity of his appearance.

Then Eagle Rock lay behind, and Coon's hoofs were beating rhythmically on the road that led up the North Valley toward Anderson's. Sitting erect in the saddle, looking hawklike at the country about him, Chanty rode, hands close to the butts of his Colts. For before he left the Lazy S he had dug another gun and belt from his war bag to pair the one he habitually wore.

Almost unconsciously he began to be aware of something—not the presence of something, but rather the absence of it. Ordinarily all these flats and slopes should be filled with sheep, grazing in that slow persistent way of theirs. But now there were no sheep—none in sight anywhere. Where had they gone?

Chanty was still debating the puzzle when he topped the last rise overlooking the sheep ranch. Pulling up on the ridge, he examined the spread long and carefully.

There were men there, at least half a dozen or more, as well as a big covered sheep wagon drawn up before the ranch house door. They were loading up the wagon with boxes and barrels. And then the wagon pulled away—not toward Chanty and the town of Eagle Rock, but in the opposite direction, south and west toward the head of the Crazy Horse.

WITH a sudden thought, Chanty turned and put the rise between him and the ranch below; he swung off at a long tangent that would carry him past the wagon and ahead of it before it reached the crossing of the Crazy Horse.

And then, just as he came near the river, he saw before him a cloud of dust, and below and amid it, the dingy gray of moving animals. It was a flock of sheep, hundreds of them, scattered out and bleating and scuffing up the dust until it all but obscured them. Yet

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it was not more than half a flock at that, for circling on and around through the brush near the river, Chanty saw the rest of the flock, part in the water itself and part already mounting the slopes of the South Valley that led up to the Schomberg range beyond.

And beyond them Chanty could see other sheep and still other sheep, spreading out, cropping the nourishing grass—already spreading like a dingy living blight over all the near slopes of the forbidden South Valley.

Chanty saw now how cunningly the thing had been planned, how foxlike Anderson was in his planning.

Anderson had known the cowmen would gather at news of the death of one of their number—would gather and ride to demand a reckoning for that killing. And taking advantage of the cowmen's absence—e s p e c i a l l y the Schomberg outfit where almost every man would be sure to be riding on Eagle Rock—he had hurriedly thrown thousands and tens of thousands of sheep across the deadline of the Crazy Horse and onto the cowmen's range. Range from which, with his own men posted in the most advantageous places, he could not be driven out by all the forces of the cattlemen combined.

There was still a chance, perhaps, that the sheepmen had not occupied all the vantage points. Or even a chance that they had not crossed all their men as yet.

Spurring his horse off at an angle and plunging deep into the brush near the river, Shanty set a course for the Lazy S.

Farther down the river, where he crossed, it was impracticable for sheep to be driven through the thickets of plum and box alder, but wiry old Coon, with years of Southern cactus and pear thickets behind him, worked and twisted his way through, while Chanty bent his head low and rode hunched as small as possible to avoid the raking fingers of the wild plum.

Coon took to the water a couple of miles from the Schomberg ford, splashed up the shallow incline on the far side and into the brush again. And as he came up out of the water Chanty suddenly saw almost beside him a little streak of ashes with a rusty wagon rim on top, and beyond it a tiny inclosure of poles and wire.

Under the mound in that enclosure John Chanty's father lay, a sheepman, murdered by raiding cattlemen. And now he, John Chanty, was riding on his way to join those same cowmen, perhaps—riding to stop a second invasion of sheep on that same range!

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.

A City Destroyed by Silence

THE city of Amyclæ, of the Morea, near Sparta, is said to have been destroyed by silence, under the following circumstances:

The Amyclæans had often been panic-stricken by the report that an enemy was coming. They passed a law that no one should spread such a report. The result was that when the Spartans were really moving on Amyclæ no one dared give the alarm, and the city was easily conquered.

Kenneth P. Wood.

6 A—6

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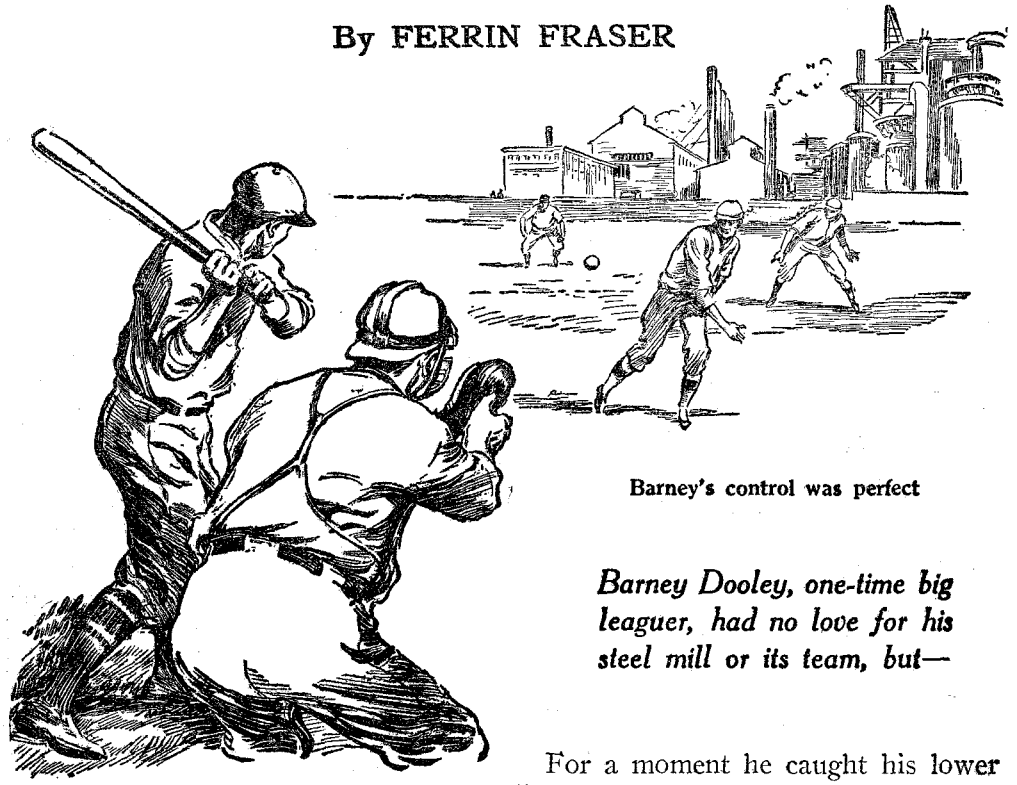
One Error

By FERRIN FRASER



Barney's control was perfect

Barney Dooley, one-time big leaguer, had no love for his steel mill or its team, but—

BARNEY DOOLEY leaned on his shovel and stared into the blinding white glare of the steel furnace. Around him trip hammers pounded, rollers thundered, and metal hissed as the pots were drawn aloft. The whole mill glowed red with reflected heat—concrete floor, steel girders, corrugated iron walls—even the sky, through grimy windows, seemed red, as if the heat of the mill had scorched even the smoky world outside.

Barney swept his bare right arm slowly across his sweating forehead. "And I used to think it was hot summers at the Polo Grounds!" he grunted.

For a moment he caught his lower lip between his teeth. He picked up a lump of coal, gripped it with his fingers and thumb as if it were a baseball, and flung it savagely into the furnace. He chewed at the tobacco in his left cheek, then spat accurately at the rim of the firebox, as he had spat so often at the rubber slabs of pitching boxes.

"Thirty-three—and through!" he muttered. "Could have had four more years, five maybe, if I'd let the booze alone. Look at Razzy France, and Hines, and old Colter Johnston. A sap—that's me."

He spat again, and dug in with the shovel, his bare arms glistening each time they swung toward the furnace. Sports writers had once called that right arm a million dollar wing. Trainers on three big league clubs had mas-

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saged it daily, rubbed it with soft creams and oils, swathed it in flannels. Pictures of it had appeared on sport pages—"Barney Dooley's Throwing Arm That Won Thirty Games Last Season in the National."—Now, instead of white baseballs at the Polo Grounds, it propelled a coal shovel in the Irontown steel mill—propelled it from eight to five, viciously, bitterly, backwards and forwards, in the blistering heat of a furnace.

The floor foreman of the mill, McGeehan, picked his way across the cement and stood for a moment at Dooley's side.

"It's three o'clock, Dooley," he said. "Better call it a day."

"What is this?" said Barney. "Christmas?"

"We want you in shape for the game to-morrow. Take the rest of the afternoon off."

Barney spat at the furnace. The way these steel workers took their little ten-twenty-thirty baseball games made him laugh. They acted as if every contest was a world's series. To-morrow, Irontown was playing the Susquehanna Miners for the industrial championship of the county; and he, Barney Dooley, who had won two world's championships, was to pitch. And McGeehan was giving him two hours off—two hours!—so he would be in shape!

"Okay," he grunted, and dropped the shovel on the floor. That would make McGeehan sore. McGeehan hated to have shovels left on the floor. But the foreman didn't mention it.

"Feeling fit, Dooley?" he asked.

"Sure. Why not?"

McGeehan put his hands on his hips and spoke above the roar of the rollers.

"Listen, Dooley. I want you to stay away from Grogan's place to-night."

Barney's eyes narrowed angrily. "I take your orders in the shop, McGeehan. Outside I'm free—see?"

"The boys are betting a lot of money on to-morrow's game."

"What's that to me?"

"I suppose you know why we took you on here, why we're paying you fifty dollars above stokers' pay a week?"

"I suppose that fifty breaks the plant, don't it? Hell, the best pitcher in both major leagues is expected to hurl a ball game a week for fifty bucks!"

"*Used* to be the best pitcher," said McGeehan sharply. "It was booze put you out of the majors, Dooley, and it was booze put you out of the minors. You couldn't even hold your own in the Tri-State League."

BARNEY remembered that last discharge bitterly. It was the final step down the ladder, the utter bottom in organized baseball. For a year, afterward, he had drifted about the country, pitching here and there for semi-pro teams, using his name and his reputation to make the few dollars still left in his pitching arm. He had finally come back to his home town, where at sixteen he had begun baseball with the mill team. It had seemed the last straw, and he clutched it bitterly. He was back where he had started, with nothing to show for his climb but a record and a name that was fast being forgotten. It was the necessity of coming home that angered him. A few years ago he had been a hero here; now he was just a broken down athlete, good enough only to feed a furnace and pitch a rural game on Saturday afternoons.

"Drunk or sober," he stated angrily to McGeehan, "I'm good enough, any

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time, to pitch for a bunch of steel workers."

"Sober, you are," said McGeehan. "Now go home and get some rest."

Barney walked slowly through the blazing mill. Big league managers had never dared talk to him like that! At one time club presidents, owners, sports writers had slapped his back and called him "good old Barney." And here was McGeehan, the floor foreman of a steel mill, who thought he could bawl him out, tell him not to take a drink, give him orders as if he were nothing but a bat boy!

Russ Condon waved a pair of tongs at him from a pit.

"Hi, Barney! Win to-morrow?"

"Sure," said Barney.

"Better. I got a month's pay bet on us."

"It's safe as a church," said Barney.

He hated Condon. Condon was captain of the mill team, and played third base. He was always giving orders, telling him what to do in pinches, how to pitch to certain batters. Just as if he hadn't forgotten more baseball than Condon ever knew!

AT the door he punched the time clock. He detested that clock. It took away his last glimmer of importance, made him a mere name like the other mill hands, a name to be docked for five minutes or half a day at the end of the week—just as if there hadn't been a time when he could call up the ball park from his hotel room and say he "didn't feel like coming out to-day."

The cinder-yard was gratefully cool, after the stifling heat of the furnaces. He gulped at the smoky air and exhaled it wearily. Behind him the rollers thumped monotonously. Before him stretched a row of drab gray houses, porchless and soot-smudged. A boy was dumping cinders from a truck, and he paused as Barney approached.

"Hello, Mr. Dooley!" he said eagerly.

Barney flipped a careless, coal-streaked hand. It seemed good to have a kid looking at him with big eyes again. There had been a time when kids hung around the dressing room door and followed him admiringly from the park, with dime baseballs to be autographed. The glamour of his name meant something to this kid, anyhow.

"Are we going to win to-morrow, Mr. Dooley?" the boy asked.

"Sure."

"I got a dollar and a half bet on you!"

"It's in the bank, kid."

He walked through the barb-wire gate and down the street. The mill loomed behind, casting a dark shadow across the road and upon the gray, box-like houses. That shadow reminded him of the way the shadow of Coogan's Bluff dropped across the Polo Grounds in the late afternoons. The memory made him angry, sulky. No mere mill foreman could tell him what to do!

He'd go to Grogan's if he liked, he'd drink all he wanted, and he'd tell McGeehan what he could do about it. He'd go now, just to show McGeehan what he thought of him.

GROGAN'S door, unlike the doors of the other speakeasies in town, was never locked. Grogan was the alderman from the mill district—had been ever since his saloon days—and was privileged to run his place wide open. The only difference which Prohibition had made to Grogan was

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to permit him to charge higher prices and to reap greater profits.

The place was deserted, except for Grogan's bulk behind the bar, polishing glasses with fat hands.

"Howdy, Barney," he said. "No work to-day?"

"McGeehan got big hearted. Gave me two hours off so I'd be in shape to-morrow!—Ain't that a laugh?"

"Nice of him.—Feller in here a while ago looking for you, Barney. Name of Conolley. Said you'd know him."

"Never heard of him."

"I told him you'd sure be in at five. He said he'd be back."

"Okay.—Scotch, Grogan."

"I hadn't ought to sell you anything to-day, Barney."

"Huh?"

"Look." Grogan pointed a fat finger at the blackboard behind the bar. It was chalked full with numbers. "The boys are betting eight to five on you to-morrow."

"Yeah? Well, when did a little drink ever hurt anybody?"

"A little one never did. It's the big drinks that hurt. They're what put you back here in the mill."

"Is that so!"

"You know it. You'd have had another four or five years in the big time, Barney, if you'd let it alone."

"Well, I didn't.—Scotch, I said."

Grogan put a bottle on the bar. "I'm a business man," he said. "I refuse no one but kids, and you're no kid any longer, Barney."

He watched the glass empty itself at Barney's lips, watched the tanned throat ripple.

"This ball game to-morrow is just baby stuff to you, ain't it?" he asked.

"Sure. Why should I care about tossing a ball for a bunch of bushers?"

Grogan crooked his thumb toward the window and the belching black stacks of the mill.

"It's serious to those guys," he said. "Remember when you was a kid, Barney, playing with the mill team? Looked like big stuff then, didn't it?"

"I was just a sap in those days. Didn't know anything."

"It still looks big to the boys back there. A county win to them is just like a world's series was to you, Barney."

"Can I help it if they're dumb?" Barney poured another drink and gulped it down. "I'm a ball player, see? I know more baseball than any nine men in that plant—or any nine from here to Chicago, if you want to go that far. How do you suppose I feel, getting fifty measly bucks to pitch ball and take orders from saps like McGeehan and Condon? Me—who's had orders from MacHaw himself!"

GROGAN rubbed the bar with his rag. He breathed on the mahogany heavily, then polished with a circular, experienced motion.

"You was a ball player, Barney. Now you're a stoker—and as a stoker you're worth no more than any other stoker up to the mill. You can sneer at fifty bucks, but it's good money; and it's supposed to buy the best you got left in you. The boys are banking on that. There's a lot of Miner money floating around, and they're taking it, and giving odds in the bargain—because you're pitching."

Barney swaggered against the bar.

"Grogan, drunk I can pitch rings around any sober guy in this country. Maybe I flopped in the leagues; but even if I had a broken arm, I could still strike out these hams around here."

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"Think you're pretty good, don't you, Barney?—How about that team of 'hams' from the Water Gap that beat you?"

"I had tough luck. How did I know that bird would triple with two on base?"

"Tough luck—and a tougher night before the game, Barney.—Oh, here's that guy who was in here looking for you."

A man whose shoulders bulged a gray suit and whose brows, beneath a black derby, seemed equally black, approached Barney with a gold smile and a genial, extended hand.

"If it's not Barney Dooley himself!" he cried. "Well, well, Barney, how are you?"

"Hello, Conolley," said Barney.

He remembered Conolley now—Lucky Mike they had called him, before gamblers were excluded from the league parks—and he shook the hand reluctantly.

"I was passing through the burg," said Conolley, "I heard you was here, and I decided to look you up. You're looking fit, Barney."

"Sure. You'd be fit if you shoveled eight tons of rock a day."

Conolley grinned, his yellow teeth showing.

"Say, I'll bet you could still stand the Dodgers on their ears, huh?"

"Shouldn't wonder."

"Remember that three-hit game you let them down with four seasons ago? Boy, that was a masterpiece! How about a drink to old times?"

"Sure," said Barney.

IT seemed good to hear his own language again, to talk with some one who really knew baseball, who had seen him work often, and who appreciated him. He was glad when Conolley brought the bottle and glasses to the corner table. A talk with some one who was baseball-wise might pep him up. It was good to be recalling old memories, anyhow.

"You know," said Conolley, pouring, "I never saw a man with a faster ball than yours, Barney—and I seen 'em all. Honest, from the stand it looked like it hopped a foot. They made an awful mistake when they gave you the gate."

"Yeah," agreed Barney.

"How are things going, anyhow?"

"Rotten."

"Heard you were pitching for the Irontown Steels."

"Ain't that a laugh?"

"It is for a pitcher like you. How much do they pay you?"

"Fifty lousy dollars."

"No!"

"That's all."

Conolley looked **incredulous**, shocked. His expression made Barney angry—not with Conolley, but with McGeehan, with Condon, with the whole town. It made him feel he was being imposed upon, robbed, used.

"You're a sap," said Conolley slowly, "to work for chicken feed like that."

"How can I get any more?"

"Want me to tell you?"

"Sure."

Conolley looked briefly at Grogan, who was standing behind the bar. Then he lowered his voice.

"You could toss to-morrow's game," he said.

"Huh?"

"Listen. I'm a gambler, but I'm a careful enough gambler only to bet on a sure thing. I been working these industrial games through the sticks ever since they fired us out of the big parks. These shop boys have got money and

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they like to stake it. It's a good racket. Now, I've got a pocketful of coin I'd just as soon bet on the Miners to-morrow—at five to eight—if I knew they were sure to win."

Barney stared blankly across the table. "Hell," he said slowly, "I never done nothing like that."

"Nobody said you did. But they're robbing you here, aren't they?—A big steel plant like that paying a measly fifty bucks for the best pitcher in the country! Look at the publicity they get out of just using your name! Why, kid, they're playing you for a sap, working you to death on the mound and in the mill. All you'd have to do would be let the Miners crack a few to-morrow. Nobody'd know you let them. Just one or two to bring in a few runs—"

"How much would I get out of it?"

"If I knew it was a sure thing, if I could count on you—"

BARNEY'S fingers were tight on his glass. He was thinking of McGeehan's curt order to "stay away from Grogan's," of Condon's snappy commands from third base, of his blistering furnace and his iron shovel.

"You can count on me, Conolley," he said.

Conolley's eyes narrowed. "It would be worth a thousand dollars—and that's a lot of money, twenty weeks' pay, in steel language."

Barney grinned drunkenly. "I'm your man," he said. "How do you pay me?"

"Five hundred now—the other half after the game. And listen. For your own sake, you want to make it look good. These steel workers would tear you apart if they thought there was anything crooked.—That's why I'm safe in passing you the five hundred, see? A tip from me and you'd be material for a hospital. So pitch your head off until about the seventh. Then ease up, weaken a little, let the Miners get a few runs, then go to work again. Got it?"

"Sure," said Barney. "Your game's in the bag, Conolley."

The hoarse-throated sound of the mill whistle rumbled through Grogan's. In five minutes the street would swarm with sweaty men with dinner pails; the brief yards of the porchless gray houses would bristle with children; aproned women would wait, pale and bare-armed, in the doorways. Grogan's would echo to the clump of heavy shoes and the clink of silver on the bar, for this was pay night; this was Grogan's weekly harvest.

Conolley spoke in a low voice.

"You better get going, Dooley. You don't want to be seen around here with me. I got a lot of bets to place between now and three o'clock to-morrow."

BARNEY always got a laugh out of Irontown Park. It was a field three blocks west of the mill, unfenced, with a rough wooden grand stand holding five hundred people. Ticket sellers lurked at its four corners, hailing approaching automobiles, selling fifty-cent pasteboards reading, "I Paid, Did You?" Automobiles were parked along the first and third base lines, far into the outfield; and after every Irontown hit they set up a clamor and bellowing of horns.

But Barney felt no urge to laugh as he walked into the field for the Susquehanna game. His meeting the day before with Conolley had stimulated him, left him more dissatisfied with his lot than before. Conolley—Conolley, who knew baseball—had said he could still

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"stand the Dodgers on their ears," that the magnates had "made a mistake" when they gave him the gate. It angered Barney that he must come to this insignificant little ball park when he might be walking up the concrete ramp at the Polo Grounds; that he must be cheered by a chorus of auto horns in Irontown, instead of fifty thousand throats in New York.

He warmed up with Bill Wood, his catcher. He threw the ball viciously, savagely, thumping it into Wood's big glove. Wood dropped his sponge and shook his red palm in the air.

"Gee, you got something to-day!" he called.

"Yeah," snapped Barney. "Plenty!"

Presently he put his glove in his hip pocket, pulled a sweater over his right shoulder, and went to the bench. Condon and McGeehan were there, their heads together, planning strategy the way they imagined Ronny Pack did. Barney spat disdainfully on the grass and sat down.

"How do you feel to-day, Dooley?" McGeehan asked.

"Swell," growled Barney.

McGeehan's bright eyes swept the stand and the autos parked along the first base line.

"Big crowd!"

"Yeah?" said Barney with sarcasm.

Condon edged closer on the bench. "Listen," he said. "Some of these Miners can hit—Robinson especially. He's death on one that's high and outside. On your life, don't give him one there."

"Okay," said Barney. He hoped Robinson would come to bat in the seventh. He'd feed him one high, and hope that Robinson would hit it into the Susquehanna river.

"Pulaski likes 'em low. He broke up a game—"

Barney turned angrily. "Who's pitching this game—you or me?" he demanded.

"You are.—I'm just telling you—"

"Well, tell somebody else. I was pitching big league ball when you were doing fifth grade homework."

He sat for a time on the bench, chewing mechanically, and trying to pick Conolley out of the crowd. Just for fun, for six innings he'd show Conolley how good he still was. His fast ball hopped a foot, did it? He'd make it hop two feet. He'd whip it over so fast that the Miners would think it was a thread!

IT was a relief when the umpire dusted the plate. He walked to the pitching box, swaggering a bit, rubbing a new ball on his sleeve. For six innings he'd show these yokels how a ball game ought to be pitched. And then, when they were getting ready to collect their bets, he'd let himself go higher than a kite. He chuckled to himself as he whipped the first ball across the plate like a bullet.

He was still chuckling when he walked from the mound at the end of the inning, after two strikeouts and a weak tap to first.

"Great work!" said McGeehan.

"Yeah. I play baseball better'n I shovel."

The sun was bright. It was a warm day, with little gusts of wind that sent the dust eddying across the diamond and stretched the foul flags out stiffly. Barney's arm hadn't felt so good in years. It was limber, supple, strong. His control was perfect. He could cut the corners of the plate as precisely as if the ball were on a string. His curves zipped smoothly, broke sharply, and zoomed into Wood's glove with resounding smacks. He enjoyed fooling

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the Miner batters, making monkeys of them, making them reach for wide ones, like kids reaching for candy. At the end of the sixth inning Irontown had one run, Barney had eleven strike-outs, and not a Miner had reached first base. The auto horns blared triumphantly as he walked across the infield to the bench.

Condon patted him gleefully on the shoulder.

"Swell! Only you took an awful chance, grooving that last ball—"

"If you got any orders to give," snapped Barney, "give 'em to the water boy. I'm the guy that's pitching this game."

He pulled his sweater over his arm and sat heavily on the bench. Lord! Here he'd pitched shut-out ball, and Condon was trying to tell him how he should have done it! Even MacHaw wouldn't have said anything after a performance like that. Well, he'd give Condon something to holler about, next inning. It was the seventh, as Conolley had said. He'd let the Miners slap a few, and then see how Condon and McGeehan liked it!

He walked to the mound, swaggering at the ovation of the horns. He'd shown them. By this time they all knew how good he was. They couldn't kick if he was nicked for a few hits now. And to make certain that the hits would count, he walked the first man—three balls, a strike to make it look good, then the fourth ball.

This was the first man the Miners had had on base, and they gave a brief cheer. He grooved the next ball, straight over the center of the plate, and not too fast. The bat cracked it sharply. A dub could have knocked a ball like that for a mile. It rose, far and high; but it sank into the center-fielder's glove. Well, that was luck.

He threw two balls then, to make it look as if he was working, then he lobbed one over. It was knocked sharply, hard, to second base. There was no chance of a double play, but the man going to first was retired, with feet to spare.

Barney wiped his forehead with his sleeve. He walked the next man, purposely, deliberately. That put two on base. But he couldn't walk them all. He couldn't walk in two runs—that would be too raw. He threw a slow ball, straight as an arrow, and waist-high. The batter cracked it—a line drive—a sure hit! But Condon went back on the grass, leaped high, and speared it with his gloved hand. Three out—no runs.

McGEEHAN was waiting for him at the bench, his eyes bright.

"You're going great!" he said. "Do you know, they haven't had a hit yet?"

"Huh?" said Barney.

"Not a hit. Maybe—maybe you'll do it! In all my life I never saw a no-hit game!"

Condon came up, shaking his left hand at his side.

"Was that hot!" he laughed. "And labeled 'two bases.'—That saved your old ball game, Barney. No hits yet—"

"And only two more innings," said McGeehan. "If—"

Barney spoke suddenly, savagely. "Shut up!" he thundered.

They stared at him blankly. He stood with his hands on his hips, chewing quickly, a queer, eager light in his eyes.

"Do you guys want to ruin it?" he demanded. "Don't you know nothing about baseball? Hell, two more innings, and you have to go blabbing about it, you have to jinx me!"

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They stared dumbly, and he waved his gloved hand.

"If this was in a league, no one would open his mouth. No one would hardly breathe—or think." He paced up and down before the bench, his spikes tearing up little triangles of grass and sod.

"Now listen, you guys—all of you. Never have I pitched a no-hit game. Once two hits, twelve times three. But all my life I've dreamed of pitching a no-hit game—and never done it. If any of you guys jinx me by talking now, I'll ram this glove right down your throat!"

No one spoke. No one moved for a moment. Then McGeehan whispered to Condon, "What ails him? Has he gone crazy?"

"Naw. I always heard real ball players was terrible superstitious. I'll say they are!"

Barney strode eagerly to the mound for the first of the eighth. He had forgotten his agreement, forgotten Conolley, forgotten that this was merely the Irontown Steels playing the Susquehanna Miners—forgotten everything but the possibility of a no-hit game. His arm was tired. Ten years ago he would have had all his blinding speed left for the finish. At thirty-three it was gone. But his wide experience and cunning were there, and he drew on them recklessly.

THE first man was tossed out at first. The second flew to center. The third hit the first ball he threw, hit it hard, hit it straight at him. Barney shot out his bare hand, felt it burn, felt the ball stick. He could hardly release his fingers to drop the ball into the box.

The auto horns bellowed. The crowd on the stand stood up and cheered. One more inning—three men to put out—and Barney Dooley would have his no-hit game!

On the bench, Barney Dooley was frantically rubbing his numbed fingers. Condon was on his knees, McGeehan at his side, both talking excitedly.

"Here—let me rub it."

"Can you go on, Barney?"

"Listen. I could throw a baseball with my foot, see? This is my no-hit game—probably the last chance I'll ever have at one. If you guys are with me—"

"Sure we are!" they told him.

"I'll need a little support this inning—"

"All right, we'll give it to you, old man!"

"They may connect with some—"

"We'll pull 'em down! Nothing goes through, Barney old boy!"

Barney felt a warm little glow creep over him. Maybe these guys were only steel workers, but they had hearts. They were all behind him, working for him, pulling for him, wanting him to get his no-hit game.

He walked slowly to the pitching box. His fingers were still numb; he could hardly grip the ball. His arm was heavy, stiff, painful at the shoulder. His teammates chatted cheerily from the field.

He heard Condon's "Come on, old kid.—We're all with you," and for the first time did not resent it. He needed Condon now, needed to have every one of the "hams" behind him on the diamond.

HE threw two balls, wide, almost wild. Then a painful strike. The bat cracked sharply against the next pitch, sent it low, and far into right field. Big Jerry Dubrowski, who pulled pots at the mill, was after it like

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a flash, snatched it down and threw it in with a laugh.

Two more men—if he could get them. He didn't; he walked them both on eight straight balls. He wiped the sweat from his eyes and spat nervously at the rubber. Robinson, the most dangerous Miner hitter, was up. What was it that Condon had said about Robinson? For the first time since he had come to Irontown, Barney turned helplessly toward third base. Condon trotted over beside him.

"Keep 'em low and inside," he whispered.

Barney pitched — carefully, awkwardly. A strike. Low and inside. Strike two. Low and— Strike three!

The auto horns roared madly. One more man, and Barney Dooley would have his no-hit game. Barney's face was pale as paste. Even the wind-up hurt his arm, pain shot through his fingers.

Ball! Ball two! He was trying to cut the corners. One across the center might ruin the game completely. Ball three!

He had to throw it then. And he got it across, straight, easy, waist high. The batter let it go. He had to do it again, had to take the chance.—The bat swung viciously. The ball sped toward third base, sizzling, hopping badly. Condon dove for it, knocked it down, dropped it, picked it up, and in the same movement lunged feet first into third base. The runner from second was out. Barney Dooley, at thirty-three, in his home town, had at last pitched his no-hit game!

And Barney Dooley was over at third base, picking up Condon, pot puller at the mill, and hugging him the way he had hugged Harry Hoyle the day the Goliaths had won a world's championship! McGeehan came running up, his eyes shining, his big hand slapping Barney's back. The team gathered around; the crowd, laughing and cheering, poured from the stand across the diamond. What if it was a mere sandlot in Irontown, a lousy steel mill team?

Barney Dooley, at thirty-three, had pitched his no-hit game!

"Lordy!" cried McGeehan. "Was that a grand ball game! No runs, no hits, no—"

"One error!" corrected Barney suddenly.

"What?"

"Yeah—one error. Mine. Not now—before the game." His eyes darkened and he pushed McGeehan aside. "Listen. Excuse me a minute. There's a guy I got to see."

It required no search to discover Mr. "Lucky" Mike Conolley, angrily pushing a path through the mob. They met, both men scowling, Conolley's yellow teeth showing between his thin lips. "You double-crosser!" Conolley growled. "I'm going to show you up for the bum you are."

"Yeah?" said Barney. "Listen, Conolley. I owe you five hundred bucks which you can get any time you come after them. And I owe you something else, too. If you ever again pull your dirty gambling racket, I hope you get handed just what I'm going to hand you now. There were no hits in this ball game, see? But there's going to be one now—and it's going to be a swift one right on your nose!"

Barney's big fist, muscled from baseballs and iron shovels, smote "Lucky" Mike exactly on the proboscis. And another part of Lucky Mike Conolley's anatomy smote the ground!

THE END.

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Always Obey Orders

By F. V. W. MASON

Author of "Captain Judas," "Captain Renegade," etc.

Inhuman to order a man to battle with his own brother—yet Major Mike Lockheed knew that Mexico must be defended from the invaders of Napoleon III

Spurr clubbed his rifle

LEADING UP TO THIS CONCLUDING INSTALLMENT

MEXICO was torn between the armed forces of Juarez, provisional president-general of the Republican forces, and the invading Imperial Foreign Legionnaires who, at the behest of Napoleon III of France, had come to Mexico to force the recognition of Maximilian I, new emperor by "divine right."

In the state of Oaxaca, two splendid ranches lay next to each other, near the fords of the Rio San Gorgio. One of these ranches, Las Estrellas, belonged to a doughty old Texan, Colonel Frederick Lockheed, late commander of the U. S. Second Dragoons. He had two sons, and both of these young men were in love with the same girl, pretty Señorita Carolina, daughter of Señor Luria, who owned the other ranch, Los Flamencos.

Captain Andy Lockheed, the elder of the two young men, had been gone for several years; and now he had returned unexpectedly, as captain of the Legion-

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naire forces who had been ordered to take the fords of the Gorgio. Returned to find that defending the fords were the Republican forces, under the leadership of Andy's younger brother, Major Mike Lockheed. It was brother against brother, in war as well as in affairs of the heart; and it had long been a tradition among the Lockheeds that every member of the family always obeyed orders.

By a clever maneuver, Mike, who was short of ammunition and whose Republican forces were outnumbered by the French, contrived to get the motley crew of the guerrilla chieftain, el Hiena, between his own men and the Legionnaires. Thus the bandits, who were the common enemies of both French and Mexicans, became his unwilling allies and fought his battle for him. Not all of the guerrillas, however, were present upon this occasion, and while the fight was taking place, others of their number were engaged in attacking the two nearby ranches, Las Estrellas and Los Flamencos. And when Mike and his brother Andy learned that el Hiena's men had killed their father, Colonel Lockheed, and had taken prisoner little Carolina, they called a temporary truce and joined their forces for an attack upon the guerrilla chief, where he was hiding out in an ancient, tumbledown Mayan ruin.

The approach to the ruin being hazardous in the extreme, Mike selected a group of men. Some were from his own forces, both Mexican and Yaqui Indians, and some from his brother Andy's Legion forces, and among them was Mike's trusted lieutenant, a Texan named Spurr. After disguising them all as ragged deserters, he gained admittance to el Hiena's den. There, the suspicions of the bandit crew were somehow aroused, and the "deserters" were disarmed and a guard was set over them. Thus, though Mike had planned to create a disturbance inside the walls of the place which would enable the main body of the attackers, under the leadership of Andy, to storm the solid gates, he was puzzled to know what might be done.

Then it was that he saw the bandit chieftain, el Hiena, leading forth the captive Carolina, in order that she might entertain himself and his drunken men by being forced to do an obscene dance.

CHAPTER VIII *(Continued).*

EL HIENA'S DEN.

"I'VE been hoping," Mike stated to the malodorous men who were crowding about him, "that we could set fire to something. But now that's not possible. With those guards out there all set and waiting, damned few of us would live to get past that door; and some of us have *got to live long enough to get that gate open* for the rest of our men!"

Ex-Sergeant Spurr's leathery face loomed near, his deep-set eyes glittering in the light of those ever increasing flames.

"And what was it you was aimin' to set fire to?" he inquired hoarsely.

"Why, that hay and fodder pile over there." Mike pointed over the shoulder-high wall which fenced off the enclosure. "It's dry, and ought to burn like tinder."

"Um," grunted Spurr speculatively, "that shouldn't be so hard."

"*Nom de Dieu!*" Dubonnet, the big Legion sergeant made an unpleasant gesture. "Don't be an idiot. That pile is two hundred feet away. How many of us would live to get there—?"

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"Wal," drawled the Texan, "just fancy that, Froggy. 'Tain't no wise necessary for any one to go yonder. I reckon there's a flint and steel among us, and maybe some tinder?"

He turned to Perronegro, the Spanish Legionnaire.

"*Oiga, Legionario,*" said he in flawless Spanish, "give me your knife."

"Why?" demanded the Spaniard suspiciously. "I can use it as well as you when the time comes."

Mike saw Spurr's slit of a mouth tighten, so he ordered the Spaniard, "Give it to him.—What's your idea, sergeant?"

Spurr balanced the stiletto speculatively before answering. "Wal, I'm pretty handy throwin' a knife, and if *I* ain't handy enough, I'll stake my life them Yaquis are. Now, sir, what I aim to do is to set some tinder afire, wrop it up in a handkercheef, and then tie said wipe to a dagger handle. I'll be a long, tall son of a buzzard if I can't stick this here knife into the fodder pile yonder. With this wind blowing — *entiende?*" He nodded significantly to a small banana palm which, sprouting from a ruined battlement, was swaying violently in the chill evening wind which springs up in Oaxaca.

In half a dozen languages the doomed adventurers uttered praises to God, and a few moments later flint was scraping steel until a large red coal glowed in a little heap of tinder carefully arranged on a silk handkerchief.

"Now two of you *hombres* start a row," snapped Spurr, as he rolled back his sleeve and again tested the weight of the knife between horny thumb and forefinger. "Ready, sir?"

"Hold on," said Mike. "We'd better wait a minute." It cost him much to say the next few words. "We'll—we'll have to wait until that dance begins, I guess. I don't want to risk anybody's seeing that knife fly through the air. Remember, this is our only chance."

SO, like amateur actors uneasily awaiting their cues, the doomed men squatted about their courtyard, conscious of the unblinking watchfulness of the guards beyond the gate, while Mike, grinding his teeth in impotent fury, watched what was taking place far down the main court.

"Gettin' set now," he murmured when, after a brief interval, several guitars accompanied by an accordion and castanets commenced to play that slow, sensuous measure to which the *cumdavle* is danced. Of its own accord, the excited crowd fell back, leaving a circle of bare stone some forty feet in diameter. On the far side of this cleared space the bonfire throbbed and flared, flinging up sparks which were twirled off to the westward by the rising wind.

As in the grip of an evil dream, Mike watched the giant with the whip step back and flourish the lash. The music swelled louder, more insistent. "*Vaya!*" yelled a thousand voices. But Carolina, now left quite alone, and hemmed in by a sea of faces, stood still, her supple figure outlined to the last detail by the fire light beating through the thin silken shawl. Suddenly the bandit's arm flashed back the whip licked out, and from the girl's lips burst a moan of pain.

Sweat sprang out on Mike's brow. God, how hard it was to stay where he was!

Again the lash cracked, and half involuntarily the girl dodged that burning lash. A great gust of laughter, fierce and evil as the cackle of so many jackals, broke out. While the wild mu-

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sic increased its tempo, the bull whip snapped; and again the figure in white reeled aside.

Mike glared about, saw that every face was now turned in the direction of the bonfire. All except the guards before the gate.

"All right," he said in a sibilant undertone. Promptly, two of the Legionnaires began a noisy dispute in which the others joined in.

It was on the far side of this milling tangle of prisoners that Mike stood, waiting the psychological moment. At his elbow was the Texan, wiry body poised and taut, a gleam in his eye, and the dagger in his right hand. From the small silken bag secured to the handle, smoke was now rising in a little curl.

"Reckon I'll have to throw right quick now," he warned. "The fire'll be burnin' the silk in a minute."

LICKING dry lips, Mike studied the guards. Yes, all their attention was on the two cursing fighters who had now come to blows.

"Now!" he cried, and his heart seemed to surge up into his head as Spurr's long arm, swinging like the beam of a catapult, sent the dagger soaring high up into the sky—a glimmering ray of light.

Quivering in every nerve, Mike watched its trajectory, saw it flash briefly against the glowing stars, saw it reach the zenith of its flight and then plunge downwards with a final shimmer of the blade before it vanished from sight beyond the figures lolling on the forage pile.

"Overshot, damn it to hell!" grunted Spurr, pushing the wind-whipped hair from his eyes. "Knew it the minute I throwed."

"Maybe not," was Mike's tense reply. "Maybe it fell in the loose hay on the far side." But he was far from sure.

"Better try another," the Texan urged.

"All right."

But unfortunately, during the pseudo fight the tinder had been spilled to the ground, and there was no more.

Louder sounded the roars of the crowd. Mike resolutely kept his eyes averted from that anguished silhouette whirling before the flames. It did no good now to watch the tragedy being enacted down yonder.

He wondered where Andy was. Was he crouched with his men at the top of that *arroyo,* waiting for the signal?

"Blast the luck! I must have thrown clear," Spurr snarled and vented a string of sulphurous curses.

But just then the music faltered, voices rose in shrill outcry, and horses began to trample and whinny with fear, for from the back of the fodder pile a whitish column of smoke was pouring. This, seized by the cold night wind, was instantly whirled off into the darkness beyond the vine-grown battlements.

CHAPTER IX.

BATTLE WITHIN WALLS.

THE ensuing few moments were for Major Mike Lockheed as agonizing and nerve racking as any he had experienced in all his brief but tempestuous career. He found himself wishing for a dozen eyes—one pair to watch the actions of those half-seen sentinels up on the ruined towers. Were they keeping their gaze fixed upon the broad mesa they were supposed to watch? Or were they watch-

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ing the growing excitement below? Even more, Mike wished that he had a chance to see what had become of Carolina, poor fragile child! What she must be suffering! He could have used another pair of eyes to study the faces of his men. And last, but not least, it was vitally important that he watch the actions of the guards outside the gateway.

Doubts and questions flooded his brain. Just how much time should he allow Andy and his men to get across that three hundred yards of bare ground? Would he and his devoted twenty-one followers be able to stand off the bandits long enough to get the gate open and to keep it so? Could he find and protect Carolina de Luria from further harm?

"*Nom de Dieu!* Look! Look at the flames," cried Dubonnet, and his unshaven features were lit by a sudden glare as a blinding sheet of flame sprang into being. Now the main fodder pile had caught and the horses in the main corral were backing in terror, screaming their fright.

All was confusion in the courtyard now. The revelers, many of them thoroughly drunk, uttered shrill, high pitched cries and ran aimlessly about. But by far the larger part of the guerrillas obeyed the orders of el Hiena, who raged back and forth, profanely ordering the wide-eyed bandits to pull the fodder pile apart.

"I'll give Andy five minutes," Mike told Spurr. "That ought to allow him time to distribute his men."

Clouds of smoke, spark-laden, came whirling down into the courtyard where the prisoners crouched, and all of a sudden flames burst out from a new point. Blazing straw carried by the high wind had fallen on the thatched roofs of certain *jacals* and set them afire. But under el Hiena's directions, the guerrillas were slowly but surely checking the flames.

A wild and desperate figure Mike made in his dusty corporal's uniform, as he wheeled to face his followers.

"In a minute," he announced, wiping smoke induced tears from his eyes, "I'll blow this whistle. When the smoke's pretty thick, we'll all rush the guards. You Mexicans mingle with the crowd, spread fire—turn loose those horses. *Entiende?*"

"*Si, señor comandante!*" they cried. "*Viva la República!*"

"And what of us?" demanded one of the Russians, his small blue eyes beginning to light as his Cossack blood warmed to the prospect of fire and pillage.

"Legionnaires, follow me. Hold the gate—to the last man. Each man must get a gun!"

From the throats of those bronzed veterans in dishevelled uniforms burst a low cry oddly at variance with the first, "*Vive l'Empereur!*"

EVEN at this harried moment, and even as he raised the whistle to his mouth, Mike could not suppress a fleeting grin. Not so bad to have Napoleon III's crack soldiers fighting his battle. True, he would have to fight them later, but let the future wait!

Before he could blow the whistle, a shot, startling and unexpected as a thunderclap on a clear afternoon, rang out overhead. Mike shot an anxious glance upward, and through the drifting smoke he distinguished a bareheaded sentinel frantically waving his arms and pointing over the wall.

"*Alerta!*" he screamed in the thin, womanish voice of the average Mexican.

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"*Alerta!*" Another sentinel was whipping up his rifle to fire into the darkness beyond the wall.

Mike waited no longer. He blew one shrill note on his whistle, then headed a wedge of men in a frantic sally through the courtyard gate. Thank God, the smoke was very thick! The guards were just waking up to the fact that death was bearing down upon them.

In great leaps, Mike bounded across the twenty-odd feet of clear space, felt his heart stop as a guerrilla in a brilliant yellow shirt whipped up his *escopeta* and fired. Its bullet whined past Mike's ear, and the other guards delivered a wavering volley.

But there must have been something awesome about those ten giants in disordered blue uniforms; and something particularly terrible about the gaunt Texan, Jake Spurr, who, stirred to his depths, was shouting that fierce warcry of the old Southwest, "Goliad!—Remember Goliad!" Most of the bandit guards remained in paralyzed impotence.

Like a giant who has long been enslaved by pygmies, but who is free at last, the ex-sergeant of the United States Dragoons burst through the guard fire, whirling a clubbed rifle like a flail of death. Mike had glimpses of him, towering over the shorter Mexicans. And the Legionnaires, too, were fighting like devils.

Before the unexpected appearance and the desperate ferocity of their late prisoners, the guards fell back on the main body of the guerrillas. These, at el Hiena's orders, abandoned their fire fighting and now began to assemble in the center of the plaza. Most of them were for the moment without arms, and so a few precious instants were granted to the desperate twelve.

"Quick!" yelled Mike. He was conscious of the fact that from beyond the walls there now sounded a rousing shout, such as comes from the throats of four hundred excited men: "To the gate—to the gate!"

AS he dashed towards the gate, hurdling over the body of a bandit whose head had been caved in by the blow of one of the Russian Legionnaires, Mike felt his heart stand still. He had never realized that there were so many bandits inside this ruin. Great God! The far end of the courtyard swarmed with their tarnished finery. He could see dense hordes of them by the wavering fire light. Rapidly, they were taking positions.

"*Aprisa!*" yelled Perronegro, his eyeballs gleaming white as he dashed the blood from a wound above his right eye. "They form for a charge!"

"Kick those saddles onto the ground," barked Mike, "make a breastwork! Some shoot while—rest—try to open—gate."

Sweating and panting, he steadied himself to fire at a couple of guerrillas who, pluckily enough, were attempting to defend the gate with their machetes.

Fire spurted from Mike's pistol, momentarily lighting up two sable faces contorted with excitement. Subconsciously he heard the distinctive *thock!* of his bullet going home. Powder fumes, hot and sour as the breath of hell, stung his nose, and he was dimly aware of a shadowy figure collapsing.

The guerrillas on the walls now were shooting as fast as they could. Louder swelled their yells and the crackle of musketry.

One—two, heavy wooden bars he heaved from their sockets, hurling

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them aside so that they fell with dull thumps on the stone paving beneath his feet.

Thwack, zwee-e-e! Plock! The guerrillas were pouring a deadly hail of bullets into that gloomy gate.

"Swing the gate!" Mike yelled. "Pull!"

A Legionnaire, tugging at Mike's side, uttered a shrill scream of agony and crumpled, momentarily blocking the gate. Frantic at the delay, Mike was forced to take time to haul the still shuddering body aside.

A great wave of sound came from behind. Risking a quick glance over his shoulder, Mike saw the entire guerrilla force bearing down on him and his handful, and with that frantic strength which is lent to the doomed, he heaved at the massive wooden door. Now it swung open, to reveal a steel-tipped column poised outside—wide eyes, *képis,* open yelling mouths . . .

"*En avant!*" The martial wave surged irresistibly forward, bayonets gleaming like surf, on over the bodies of those who had fallen while fighting to open the gate.

To avoid being trampled, Mike flattened against the stonework, watching the bearded veterans of Africa dash by on the double. Yelling like fiends they hurried past him, their sweaty faces red in the glare of the conflagration.

Promptly, el Hiena's men opened fire on the packed mass of Legionnaires filing through that gateway.

TWO whole ranks of Legionnaires who had just gained the courtyard fell as though cut down by the single sweep of a sickle. But a few managed to survive. These fell on one knee and began to fire steadily at that black mass of bandits who came sweeping onward to clear the gate.

Though the French, with indomitable courage, swept on through the entrance, the bullets of the bandits played havoc in their ranks. Hampered by the dead and dying, they began to fall into disorder.

All at once Mike knew that the French could not carry the passage unless something happened.

The night was now become a bedlam of sound and smell. Dominating everything was the deadly rattle of musketry which, in a measure, drowned out the shouts and shrieks of the fighters.

Forced flat to the entrance wall by the squirming mass of Legionnaires, Mike thought that the gateway to hell itself could not compare with such a scene; for the fire, now unchecked, roared ever higher, throwing the bandit force into sharp relief. Ammunition, perhaps that which had been captured the day before from Mike's own train, began to explode with deafening detonations.

All about him, men panted and swore, and the smell of hot wool and sweat was almost as strong as the sickish sweet reek of spilt blood and torn entrails.

"Fight, you devils! *En avant!* Keep moving!" There was Andy's voice in the darkness outside. "More of you off to the right. *Más aprisa!*"

Mike, once the pressure eased momentarily, snatched up the bayoneted rifle of a fallen Legionnaire and, bareheaded, joined the struggling mass in the gate tunnel. Subconsciously, he realized that the battle was now at that critical stage which would probably spell defeat for one side or the other.

Beyond the *képis* of the foremost Legionnaires, he could see a shifting throng of guerrillas, drawn up in a thick rank all the way across the great courtyard. They were firing steadily,

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and from the walls above their sharpshooters were also shooting down into the court.

The Legionnaires, bayonets r e d l y a-gleam, doggedly kept on trying to win through the gate, but their attack was unmistakably losing momentum.

Despair seized Mike. God! The campaign which he had so carefully plotted was going astray. Carolina would soon be doubly lost.

Brave as the French were, human beings could not stand the rain of lead which was pouring on them, and as a fresh group of Legionnaires fell in a bloody welter, the men in blue and red halted, wavered, and in spite of their N. C. O.'s frantic calls, began to fall back.

"Defeat!—You've l o s t!" shrieked perverse, demoniac voices in Mike's soul. But at that moment a wild clatter of hoofs rang out. From corrals, which had been pulled down by Mike's Yaquis and *caçadores*, there burst a flood of fear-maddened horses. These, long terrified by the smoke and the sparks which had been raining on them during the past ten minutes, were quite crazed with fear. Snorting like steeds from Valhalla, they galloped wildly about.

IN a shaggy torrent they charged headlong across the vast courtyard, now slipping on the blood of the dead, now tripping on the shrieking wounded, and at last bumping into the rear of the guerrilla line, so throwing them out of position. Cursing, el Hiena's men snatched out their machetes and hamstrung the maddened brutes as fast as they could.

"Now we've got them.—*En avant! Adelante! Forward!*"

Seeing the disorder of the guerrillas, and feeling the slackening of that murderous fire, the invaders at last poured in through the gate and quickly formed a line inside.

"*Viva la República!*" Over the walls from outside Escandón's green-coated infantry now began to appear and made their machetes gleam like bright windmills of death.

Mike, sweat-bathed and gasping for breath, found himself on the right wing, firing at the struggling mass of bandits. His heart lifted when a Legion bugle's brazen voice shrieked a brief call. Down swept the long French bayonets, and with a heart-shaking cry of "*Vive l'Empereur!*" they charged, while behind them dismounted dragoons and the balance of the *caçadores* poured in through the gate to form a second line behind the Legionnaires.

At last Mike saw Andy. Outwardly cold and collected, he was skillfully directing the attack, using his dripping sword as a pointer.

All at once el Hiena's men lost their nerve. Shrieking in mortal terror, they broke and ran for the wall, scattering like a flock of chickens when a hawk hovers above. By tens and twenties they scaled the walls and dropped over.

"To bad to let 'em get away," Mike bawled to his brother.

"They won't," Andy shouted grimly. "Your *encurado* lancers are waiting for 'em outside."

CHAPTER X.

BACK TO THE WARS.

THROUGH the drifting acrid, blue smoke Andy bore down on his brother. Mike's face was black with powder, his uniform was ripped open, and a shallow cut on his gaunt left cheek was sending a trickle of blood dripping across his chin.

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"For God's sake, where's Carolina?" he shouted, above the pitiful screaming of the hamstrung horses and the yells of the guerrillas who, cornered in various parts of the ruin, were now trying to buy their sordid lives.

Now and then, from outside the walls, rang the shriek of some wretch, speared by the lancers and *encurados* who circled outside like so many vigilant cats waiting for ferret-run rats to appear.

"Answer me, or I'll go crazy!—Have you seen Carolina?" repeated Andrew, dashing a smoke-blackened hand across his forehead.

"Not since the fight began," replied Mike. "Come along. The last I saw of her was down at that end—"

"God, if they've hurt her—!" choked Andy, a terrible light in his gray eyes.

Mike thought it wise to forbear any mention of the scene which he had beheld by the firelight.

"You don't know what it means," Andrew choked as they ranged back and forth, "to have thought Carolina lost, to have found her again—then to—"

He ducked to avoid a swirl of spark-laden smoke; and while Mike directed the efforts of some of his green-clad *caçadores* in forcing a doorway, Andrew called together a dozen of his Legionnaires, directing them to abandon all other effort in order to search for the missing girl.

Slowly the search took shape, as groups of terrified bandit women, together with their sullen masters, were herded at the bayonet point into the center of the courtyard.

Presently the various parties of searchers began to report. But none of them had seen a trace either of el Hiena or of the Señorita de Luria.

"Well, one thing's a cinch," growled the commander of the French forces, "they haven't gone outside the walls. So they must be here in the ruin somewhere."

It was then that one of the Yaquis who had accompanied Mike ran up, his oblique eyes lit with excitement.

"*Señor comandante,*" he panted. "Quick! Follow me. My brother struggles with three guerrillas."

"Where?" snapped Mike.

But the Yaqui had already turned and was bounding off to the left. Without an instant's delay, the brothers set off after him, full tilt. They found him in a ruined shrine, pointing to a spot where a couple of packing cases stood pulled aside to reveal the dark entrance of a shaft. It was down this that the Yaqui darted, his naked shoulders glimmering in the light of a brand which he snatched from a blazing *jacal*.

THE tunnel proved to be shallow, very short, and ending in a small, rock-walled chamber. In it a strange sight could be seen by the feeble light of a couple of gourd lamps. Two men were wrestling on the floor. One of them Mike instantly recognized as a Yaqui. He was locked in a death grip with a huge shirtless guerrilla, who strove to drive a dagger between the Indian's ribs. Intent above them towered the man who had wielded the whip over Carolina, and el Hiena, his evil mouth twisting and jerking more than ever. Just as the trio bounded across the threshold, the guerrilla tore his arm free and succeeded in plunging his knife into the side of that Yaqui who had struggled so valiantly against great odds.

Just a glimpse did the brethren catch of a pale, dishevelled Carolina, crouched in a corner, her huge eyes

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round with horror as she clutched the tattered remains of the shawl in an ineffectual attempt to cover her nakedness.

In deadly silence, the six men flew at each other, Mike selecting the colossal man of the whip. Andy took el Hiena; the Yaqui his kinsman's murderer.

It was a fantastic, nightmarish sort of struggle that ensued by the amber light of the flickering gourd lanterns. It was a question of who could most efficiently use knife or fist, for the space was too limited to admit the use of pistols.

"Andrew! Mike! Save me!" Choked and desperate was Carolina's appeal.

Above the panting combatants a hideous Aztec god leered down as though pleased to see human blood spilt at his feet once more.

The struggle was as brief as it was fierce, since the three marauders were no match for a trio burning with a white-hot sense of outrage. The guerrilla, already weakened by the dead Yaqui's knife thrust, was the first to go down, with the avenger's knife point buried in the throat, just beneath his ear. Next, Mike's clubbed pistol took his yellow-featured enemy of the whip between his small, evil eyes.

A fraction of an instant later, Andrew's fist impacted squarely upon el Hiena's jaw with a *smack* that rang loud in the little shrine; and the outlaw chief reeled backwards, to strike his head against the feet of the stone idol. Uttering a brief, strangled gasp, he flung his jewelled hands towards the smoky ceiling and fell senseless, thus affording a prime candidate for the gallows.

"Andrew! Mike!" Swaying, forgetful of her disarray, Carolina arose totteringly, the sheen of her white body gilded by the gourd lamps. First she fixed her glorious eyes on the older and then on the younger brother—

"*Mis hermanos!* Ah! Never had I thought to see you again."

"Thank God! Thank God!" was all Andrew could gasp as he snatched a gay *zerape* from a nail driven into the wall, and flung it about Carolina's smooth white shoulders.

"Ah, I am doubly happy!" she sobbed. "First, that you came in time, second that you fight side by side, and not one against the other. Help me, please—I—I am very tired."

AS they led her forth from the sinister presence of the Aztec idol, both brothers were silent, suddenly aware that with the passing of another day their strange armistice must end. Once more, they must become bitter enemies—officers who must obey orders. But of that they said nothing to Carolina de Luria.

The sun climbed high in a brazen sky before the joint expedition completed its work at the ruin. All morning long, group after group of those human tigers who, under el Hiena, had scourged Oaxaca for the last five years faced the tireless firing squads. Some died bravely, screeching obscene defiance at their executioners; others wept and slobbered for the mercy they had denied others. But all died.

Last of all, the punitive expedition hanged the arch-villain el Hiena, together with his lieutenant, the wielder of the whip, from that same gateway which had been so dearly won. A deep sigh arose from the assembled troops as el Hiena's body at last dangled quite still.

"The *aldeanos* will sleep better now," they murmured.

Then the expedition, having loaded

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their wounded on such of the bandits' horses as had not been hamstrung or destroyed by fire, set off from that forbidding ruin over which thick flocks of crows and buzzards were already circling in anticipation.

"*Qué hay?*" demanded Carolina. "Why do you two ride like a pair of mummies? Have you not won? Have you not rid the world of an evil monster? Smile then!"

Once more her bright and cheerful self, and bewitchingly mannish in a rich man's bolero and a pair of silver mounted breeches selected from the loot, the heiress of the de Lurias turned from one to the other of the somber-faced brothers.

Mike forced a smile and raised his eyes from the sunburnt grass slipping by under el Aquila's dainty hoofs. "Oh, I reckon Andy's thinking about the men he's lost—over a hundred. But at that rate, I should look even sadder; I've got a hundred and thirty-five killed, wounded and missing. It cost me something to take that blasted ruin!"

"Sure, that's it—" Andy began, but at length he raised unhappy eyes. "It's no use, Mike, I can't pretend any longer."

"Pretend?" A look of pained surprise crept into Carolina's dark eyes. "What is wrong? Am I not safe? Are you not allies?"

"We were, little sister," explained Mike gently. "But very soon we shall have to separate and take up the war again—just where we left off."

CAROLINA'S slim body shook as under a blow, and she stared incredulously from the man in red to him in blue.

"Oh, *Dios, Dios!* Then it is true?—But you cannot do this! God forbids such wickedness! Are men mad that they must fight whenever they disagree?"

Fiercely she pleaded, first with Andrew and then with Mike.

"No, Carolina, dear," said Mike in a hopeless monotone. "We've got to play the game as gentlemen play it. Look here, when we separate you'd better go along with Andy. Your plantation may have been sacked, along with ours. You'll be safe with the French. Our armistice lasts until sunrise and then—*quién sabe?*" He spread his hands with a sad effort at gaiety.

But Carolina only wept.

Late in the afternoon, Lieutenant Escandón urged his rangy bay up alongside and said:

"*Por Dios,* major. All day have I awaited your orders. Now I must ask for them. What do you intend? You know, there are not two hundred cartridges left among our forces? The ammunition which we hoped to recover was burnt."

But even now, Mike did not seem ready to face the problem presented by the future. Puzzled, the young Mexican aristocrat followed his commander's absent gaze, and found it fixed on a range of bare, brown hills lying far off to the left.

"Why," he inquired with well-bred patience, "why do you day-dream like this? Surely you must know there is no help coming from Conino? All day long you have looked as though you expected to see reënforcements coming, and God knows General Juarez has not a man to—"

WITH surprising speed Mike aroused himself from his lethargy and clapped a hand over the *caçadore* officer's mouth.

"Silence!" he hissed, blue eyes very

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intent beneath the shako visor. "I want you to talk about our cavalry, our splendid *encurados,* our superb dragoons from Guanajato. *Entiende?* Speak so that the French commander can hear without realizing that you are talking for his benefit."

"But," Escandón's very black eyes were eloquent with despair, "that would be useless. We have no such cavalry—a troop of dragoons, maybe, at Conino. Mere talk will not frighten this terrible brother of yours. He will advance on the fords to-morrow morning. I know him now. *Si,* his legionnaires will attack, and then we die. Think well, *comandante*—think well before you doom us all to death."

"My brother may not be frightened," was Mike's strange reply as Escandón rode off with a bitter laugh, "but others may be. Good God, if only I knew whether those gallopers got through yesterday— Sergeant!" he beckoned Lieutenant Spurr up alongside, "how many cattle did we have down in the Novedad valley?"

"About five thousand head, sir—prime long horn beeves."

"Um," Mike nodded, and was mimicked by his shadow, blue-black on the hot earth. "And you really think those messengers got through?"

"They're the best scouts hereabouts. Yep, you can bet your sombrero that General Juarez got your despatch last night, 'bout the same time we was tanglin' up with them *mal hombres* back yonder."

"And the note to Station Number One?"

"Told Luke to give it to Frank Baldwin. Frank's onery as a cow with a new calf, but he'll follow orders 'spite hell, high water or congress." The Texan's bright black eyes narrowed and he rode closer. "'Scuse my askin', sir, but what in hell do you want with them beef critters?"

A bleak smile passed over Mike's hot, red face. "I'm trying to keep from killing my brother, or have him kill me. You'll agree there's not much fun in either situation?"

"So long as he's set to take that there ford, and you're jest as set to stop him, don't see how you can help it," replied the Texan, shaking his narrow head. "Wal, mebbe when we reach the heights of San Gabriel we'll see a way out."

"Maybe. Keep a sharp lookout towards the west—tell the Yaquis, too. They can see a field mouse scratching its ear a mile away."

Taking a canteen from his pommel, Mike drew a long draught of tepid water, for the sun was hot and he was weary with that weariness familiar only to veteran soldiers.

SOON the heights of San Gabriel loomed ahead, three low hills crowned with dead trees on which flocks of buzzards roosted. It was then that Mike, with a muttered excuse to Andy and the tragic-eyed girl riding numbly by his side, cantered ahead, ostensibly to study the San Gorgio valley which, in all its lush richness, lay spread out below like an unrolled chart.

Like a sculptured rider the young brother sat his saddle, again and again sweeping the terrain below with infinite care, as though his soul's salvation lay yonder. At last, with a face that had become wan, haggard and strangely aged, he turned and fell in at his place at the head of the column.

By one of those strange paradoxes that make war the sardonic thing it is, on that last night of their armistice the two forces made camp together above the ford that would soon run red with

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their mutual blood. The bronzed Legionnaires drank hugely of the fiery *tequila* and *pulque* which the little brown *soldados* of the Republic offered to them; and, not to be outdone, they made free with their own white bread, red issue wine, and rank but aromatic tobacco.

While dusk settled, dragoons, *encurados* and Imperialist cavalrymen mingled in jovial camaraderie; and when some of the German Legionnaires lifted their magnificent voices in the plaintive *liebeslieder,* the swarthy and bronzed groups about the smouldering camp fires fell silent.

But there was neither mirth nor conviviality in the officers' tents. Talking and smiling mechanically, sat Carolina, with one of the brothers on either side. Captain Zapatos, his empty sleeve dangling limp because of a wounded shoulder, sat frowning into space as he mused on the morrow.

Lieutenant Escandón played listlessly at picquet with Lieutenant La Marche; and it was the French lieutenant, alone of all that assemblage, who seemed comparatively light-hearted. But even he had his silent moments whenever he read the suppressed anguish on the faces of that trio sitting a little to one side and staring out at the bivouac.

"Surely," Carolina was saying for the hundredth time, "you will not, cannot, commit this criminal folly? Duty has no right to make men demons—"

"We have no choice," Mike said. "Soldiers must obey orders. And so, when dawn comes, I am going to march my force across the San Gorgio—"

"And then—you—you'll retreat?" How fervent was the plea in Carolina's eyes. "Ah, dear God!—Say, promise, that you'll retreat? Give me my Andrew, Mike dear. You know how I love him—he is everything in the world to me.—And you come next!"

"NO, dear Carolina. I'll halt on the other bank—and take up a defensive position."

"And very soon after that," Andrew added with downcast eyes, "I shall attack. You see, little Carolina, it doesn't interest General Lorençez at all that I'm fighting my own flesh and blood—that I'll have to hang Mike and Escandón and Spurr and the rest if I capture them. To Lorençez it's only a question of capturing this important ford. All he cares about is whether it's held—or not held. General Méjia is so damned scared of an attack on our flank that he wants this whole valley made safe."

And as Andy said that, Escandón glimpsed Mike's eyes flickering upwards a brief instant.

"Well, Bud, he's got good reason!" observed Mike suddenly. "His flank isn't safe. Did you see that Indian ride up to me this afternoon?"

Every head in the tent turned to face the speaker.

"Yes. What of it?"

"Well, he was telling me that six thousand Guanajato dragoons, after making forced marches, had at last joined our main army."

To this the man in blue uttered a strident laugh and beat his fists together gently. "You lie like a gentleman, Mike! But there's no use bluffing. We've a swarm of reliable spies at your headquarters. Not a squad of *peons* joins your outfit that we don't know of the next day—or the day before, maybe. Six thousand dragoons?"

From the shadows Lieutenant La Marche uttered a mirthless laugh. "Six thousand cows, more likely. I hope,

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Major Lockheed, that your staff won't try anything so silly as driving cattle to make General Méjia think they're cavalry."

"Of course not!" said Escandón, hurriedly.

Inexorably, La Marche went on. "Any idiot can tell when a dust cloud is caused by cavalry or cattle. You see, my dear lieutenant, cattle don't wear bridles, nor do they have riders who carry sabers which sparkle and shine in the sun."

A close observer might have noticed that Mike's big hands twitched just a fraction of an inch as he heard that. But, forcing a smile to his sun-cracked lips, he said:

"We'd never try to fool an old campaigner like General Méjia. He's seen too many cattle and too many cavalry —at a distance."

Again the conversation languished, until at last Carolina vented a weary sigh, got up, and taking the brothers by the hands led them out of the tent and into the clean, blue-white starlight which shed a delicate radiance over plain, mountain and stream.

"Your minds are made up, I see," she said in a low but firm voice. "And I, too, have made my mind up. Don Mike," she turned toward him the pale oval of her face, which in its distress was lovelier than Mike could ever recall having seen it, "I—I'm going to stay in Andrew's camp."

"Fine," said the younger brother heartily, "I'd hoped you would, Carolina. Now, there's no use being silly about all this."

BUT the stars shimmered on the Spanish girl's glossy head when she shook it gently. "I stay because I am already through the French lines. I—I will never return to the San Gorgio country again. If—if Andrew dies, I shall mourn his memory in a convent beyond the sea. If you die, dear Mike, I swear I will never marry the man whose hands are red with your blood.—Perhaps that," she said with a flare of anger, "will bring you two to your senses." So saying, she hurried off in the darkness to her tent, leaving the unhappy brothers to face the longest night that either of them had ever known.

All night long the two sat by a small, yellow-flickering fire, talking of the happy days that had been; of the hours they had spent in childhood, trapping rabbits and shooting at coyotes, of their father, that upright, sternly kind old man; of a thousand other nearly forgotten episodes.

The stars rolled on in their courses and a moon, paler and smaller than it had been the night before, cast a feeble radiance on the two armies. Within a few hours those armies would be flinging themselves upon each other.

Long they listened to the mournfully musical *"Centinela alerta-a-a!"* of Mike's sentries; to the eerie wail of a coyote; to the deep-toned snoring of the Legionnaires, those men from the other side of the world.

At last the eastern sky paled, and Mike, shivering a little in the cold predawn wind, got up.

"Good-bye, Andy," he said. "And —and good luck. If I lose, I promise that you won't take me alive. Carolina will never be able to blame you for my death."

"And I—I won't live to take you prisoner, Bud." Andrew's face was quivering. "Oh God!" he cried fiercely. "We can't—we can't do this. I—I'll go back to Lorençez, tell him I refuse to obey."

"And get shot for insubordination

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in the face of the enemy," reminded Mike gently. "No, it wouldn't do any good. Your general would only send some one else, some one whom I'd have to fight. And there's Carolina, too, you see.—It's got to be done. Good-bye, Bud."

Neither could look at the other as they clasped hands. Then Mike, still feeling the warmth of Andy's hand on his fingers, rode over to his part of the bivouac and briefly ordered his buglers to blow the reveille.

CHAPTER XI.

DRAGOONS!

AGAIN the plovers whistled as they ran with brisk little steps along the silvery sands of the fords of San Gorgio. Again the quail began to call to each other, and again the tops of the Santa Lucrezia mountains grew rosy. But Mike saw none of these things. For the first time in his life he cursed the frightened *soldados* as he ordered them into position.

"Courage is good, but this—Name of God, this is suicide," protested Zapatos fiercely. "Half of the men have no bayonets. There is not ammunition enough for more than one volley. *Por piedad,* order a retreat!"

"We must stay," said Mike stiffly. "Obey orders, captain, always obey orders. That's the motto which makes a good army and wins the battles."

How cool that dawn wind was. How often he had sniffed its perfumed sweetness, and now it was for the last time! Yes, this would very likely be the last time he would see the sun lift above those familiar, ragged peaks on the horizon.

"More men to the center, dammit!" he roared. "What's the matter with you, Spurr? Throw a squad in behind that row of rocks."

"Yes, sir," replied Spurr, his narrow eyes a-gleam with the prospect of battle. He scrambled down towards the river bed with a group of frightened-looking *caçadores* shambling at his heels.

Over Mike crept a great sense of futility, of helplessness, above all, of weariness. He had struggled and fought to prevent this enormous trick which Fate had played on him and his brother. He had gambled and had won the minor stakes, only to lose in the last and vital turn of the game. He shivered in the keen air, and drew himself up very straight. On the other bank the Legionnaires were falling in, their solid ranks of red pantaloons weaving a bright, restless design. Out on their flanks the red and green Imperial Lancers were commencing to pull the gayly fluttering pennons from their lance tips, in preparation for the grim work ahead.

God, if he only had some ammunition it would be a cinch to hold that ford! But he hadn't. Looking more and more like a desperate young Mars, Mike strode back and forth, haunted eyes ever reverting to the eastward.

"*Oíga! Señor comandante!* A messenger!" Half a hundred eager voices called out.

AN Imperial Lancer, with a white flag snapping at his lance head, was cantering down to the misty water. Now he was in, and splashing across to hail the red-clad commander of the Republican army.

"For the last time, *señor, el Capitán* Lockheed begs you to surrender, for the sake of the men under your command."

A sudden resolution shook the red-

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headed officer's being. It was not right to lay down these men's lives. He would surrender. Yes, by God, he would!—But even as he opened his mouth there rang in his ears the deep voice of his father, "Obey orders, my son, always obey orders!"

There was no doubt that General Jaurez, that desperate, oft-betrayed Indian patriot, had ordered him to hold the fords to the last man. He shook his head.

"*Gracias.* Please tell Captain Lockheed we will defend the ford."

Solemnly, the lancer dipped his lance in salute, then wheeled and splashed back across the ford.

"No one is to fire until I give the word," Mike shouted, and his heart sank when he saw how few of his men made any attempt to adjust their sights. A few were hopelessly locking their bayonets in place. Poor devils! They weren't cowards, these Mexicans, for cowards would never sit there with empty guns waiting for the scythe of doom to mow them down.

On the other bank a bugle shrilled, sounding the advance. The blue ranks stirred, began to move, long bayonets gleaming in the light of the newly risen sun.

Poor Carolina! She must be dying a hundred deaths. And Mike's anguish increased as he made out his brother Andrew, well out in front of his men. He was riding slowly down to the river, the scarlet top of his *képi* glowing bright red. Stiffly, like an automaton, he rode; his rawboned black mare slipping a little as she neared the water's edge.

Clump! Cr-r-unch! Clump! The tramp of those hobnailed feet on the other side of the river sounded loud. Mike could see Lieutenant La Marche, his eyeglasses gleaming faintly, as with a drawn sword he directed the movement.

FORWARD rode Andrew, neither sword nor pistol in his gauntleted hand. But his head was up and his eyes were fixed on the red figure of his brother, standing outlined on the bank above, an easy target for the first Legion volley.

Now Andrew's horse was taking to the water, sending spray up on the rider's knee boots.

"Ready!" cried Mike, his voice hoarse. A few musket locks *clacked.* "Aim!" How horrible to think that Andrew—with everything to live for—would in an instant tumble into that swift current, robbed of all his pulsing life. Among the rearmost Imperial Lancers there arose a shout.

"*Para! Para!*—Halt! A messenger!"

Mike's red-clad figure relaxed while he watched Andy halt his mare. Down the far bank came sliding a gorgeous, yellow-clad Hussar galloper. He thrust into Andy's hand a dispatch.

Through his glasses Mike watched his brother read the missive, saw that set frown disappear from Andy's face, and a smile twitch the corners of his mouth. This expression was then in turn replaced by an expression of amazed incredulity.

Facing his men, the Legion officer gave an order which presently sent them scrambling back up that bank which they had descended only a moment before. Then Andrew signalled for parley.

"Come on, sergeant." Mike, grinning from ear to ear, flung himself on El Aquila and cantered out into the stream.

"What is it, Bud?" he inquired. "Get cold feet?"

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Andy grinned. "No, damn the luck! Something's always spoiling our fun. Just got a frantic dispatch from Méjia ordering my instant return to the main column. He must be crazy! He said a big cavalry force has appeared and threatens our communications."

"Ah, yes!" said Mike. "Those will be the Guanajato dragoons."

"Dragoons, your grandmother!" snapped Andy. "I know damn well Juarez hasn't more than a troop of cavalry to his name. A reliable spy told me so last night. He never lies to me."

"And yet Méjia is a good general," quoth Mike, wiping drops of sweat from his brow. "Maybe if we go to that hilltop we can see what's happened."

SIDE by side, they cantered to the hill and halted there, to be gilded by the sunrise. Out came glasses.

"There they are, sir," Spurr said, pointing far to the east. "Look at 'em, will you?"

In silence, Andy, Mike and La Marche studied that distant pall of dust near the head of which could be distinguished row on row of very distant cavalry.

"Must be a whole brigade," cried Escandón. *"Viva la República!"*

All the observers saw that it was indeed a huge pillar of dust; moreover, that from the center of the dust cloud the morning sun drew innumerable sparks of fire such as never shone from dusty cattle. Straggling behind were more dragoons, evidently mounted on sick and feeble horses.

"We must leave at once," said Lieutenant La Marche, excitedly. "Those are not cattle. The flash of breastplates and the gleam of the helmets are there."

"It's cavalry, all right," said Andy with a slow smile. "Compared to you, Bud, Napoleon was a rookie. And some time very soon Carolina and I will name our eldest after you."

"Mon Dieu!" La Marche protested. "You are wasting time, captain. That cavalry will cut us off in a half hour!"

Once more the hard, brown hands of the brethren clasped, then Mike wheeled and recrossed the river.

"All right, sergeant," he said, "call in the men. We'll go back to Las Estrellas and try to clean up the mess there. Then I'm going to show you something."

"Yes?" grinned Spurr. "I expect you're going to show me a brigade of dragoons. Where in hell did you get 'em?"

"From up my sleeve.—Here, you lancers! Get in column!"

Though thoroughly sacked, the ranch was yet in reparable condition.

When the sun had just begun its downward course, that tall column of dust came very near to Las Estrellas.

Mike rode out to meet it.

But it was not a brigade of cavalry that he reviewed—only a single hot and dusty troop of dragoons who were herding along some five thousand long-horned cattle which were lowing thirstily. The horns of the big steers were decked with the weirdest assortments of ornaments imaginable. The great herd shuffled past, ever and anon shaking their heads and making the sun play on belt buckles, forks, knives, spoons, mirrors—in fact anything that could cause a glitter. But the objects were very tightly lashed to the horns of the rightful tenants of Las Estrellas.

Slowly a big, bronze-helmeted captain of dragoons rode up to Mike and saluted gravely. *"Bueno?"* he inquired.

"Bueno," replied Mike with a grin.

THE END.

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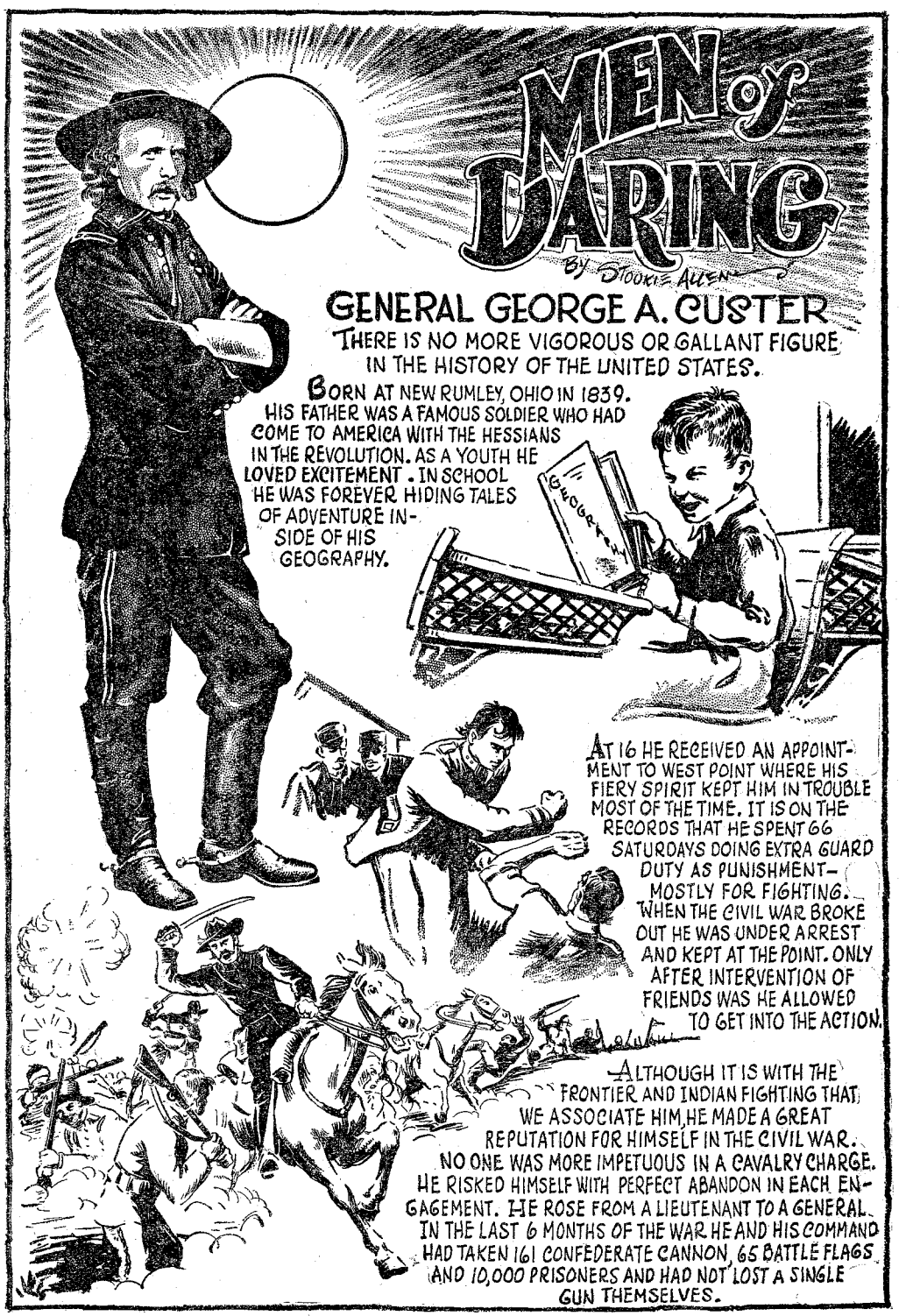
MEN of DARING
By Stookie Allen
GENERAL GEORGE A. CUSTER
THERE IS NO MORE VIGOROUS OR GALLANT FIGURE IN THE HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES.
BORN AT NEW RUMLEY, OHIO IN 1839. HIS FATHER WAS A FAMOUS SOLDIER WHO HAD COME TO AMERICA WITH THE HESSIANS IN THE REVOLUTION. AS A YOUTH HE LOVED EXCITEMENT. IN SCHOOL HE WAS FOREVER HIDING TALES OF ADVENTURE IN-SIDE OF HIS GEOGRAPHY.
AT 16 HE RECEIVED AN APPOINT-MENT TO WEST POINT WHERE HIS FIERY SPIRIT KEPT HIM IN TROUBLE MOST OF THE TIME. IT IS ON THE RECORDS THAT HE SPENT 66 SATURDAYS DOING EXTRA GUARD DUTY AS PUNISHMENT— MOSTLY FOR FIGHTING. WHEN THE CIVIL WAR BROKE OUT HE WAS UNDER ARREST AND KEPT AT THE POINT. ONLY AFTER INTERVENTION OF FRIENDS WAS HE ALLOWED TO GET INTO THE ACTION.
ALTHOUGH IT IS WITH THE FRONTIER AND INDIAN FIGHTING THAT WE ASSOCIATE HIM, HE MADE A GREAT REPUTATION FOR HIMSELF IN THE CIVIL WAR. NO ONE WAS MORE IMPETUOUS IN A CAVALRY CHARGE. HE RISKED HIMSELF WITH PERFECT ABANDON IN EACH EN-GAGEMENT. HE ROSE FROM A LIEUTENANT TO A GENERAL. IN THE LAST 6 MONTHS OF THE WAR HE AND HIS COMMAND HAD TAKEN 161 CONFEDERATE CANNON, 65 BATTLE FLAGS AND 10,000 PRISONERS AND HAD NOT LOST A SINGLE GUN THEMSELVES.

This feature appears in ARGOSY every week

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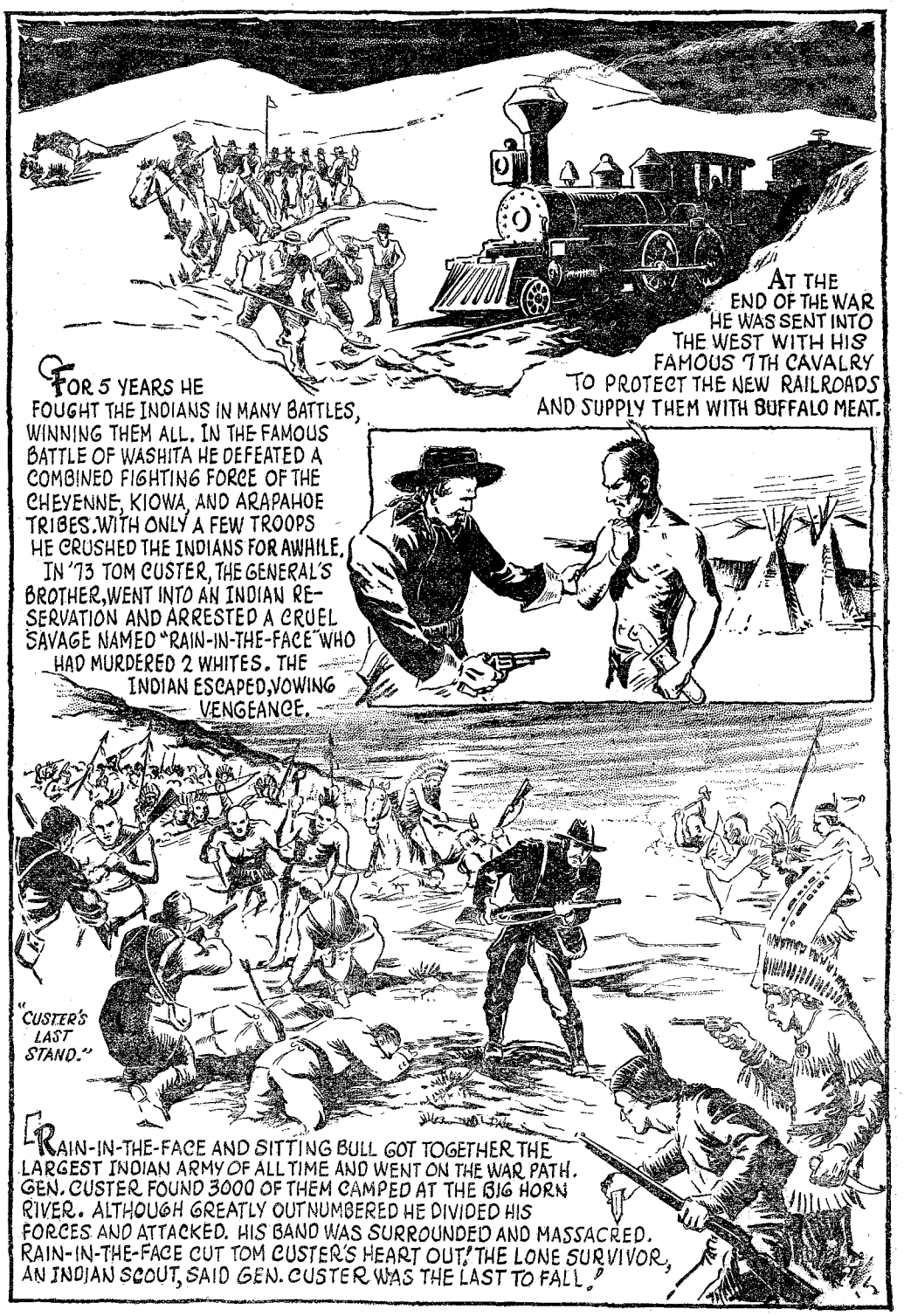
AT THE END OF THE WAR HE WAS SENT INTO THE WEST WITH HIS FAMOUS 7TH CAVALRY TO PROTECT THE NEW RAILROADS AND SUPPLY THEM WITH BUFFALO MEAT.
FOR 5 YEARS HE FOUGHT THE INDIANS IN MANY BATTLES, WINNING THEM ALL. IN THE FAMOUS BATTLE OF WASHITA HE DEFEATED A COMBINED FIGHTING FORCE OF THE CHEYENNE, KIOWA, AND ARAPAHOE TRIBES. WITH ONLY A FEW TROOPS HE CRUSHED THE INDIANS FOR AWHILE.
IN '73 TOM CUSTER, THE GENERAL'S BROTHER, WENT INTO AN INDIAN RESERVATION AND ARRESTED A CRUEL SAVAGE NAMED "RAIN-IN-THE-FACE" WHO HAD MURDERED 2 WHITES. THE INDIAN ESCAPED, VOWING VENGEANCE.
"CUSTER'S LAST STAND."
RAIN-IN-THE-FACE AND SITTING BULL GOT TOGETHER THE LARGEST INDIAN ARMY OF ALL TIME AND WENT ON THE WAR PATH. GEN. CUSTER FOUND 3000 OF THEM CAMPED AT THE BIG HORN RIVER. ALTHOUGH GREATLY OUTNUMBERED HE DIVIDED HIS FORCES AND ATTACKED. HIS BAND WAS SURROUNDED AND MASSACRED. RAIN-IN-THE-FACE CUT TOM CUSTER'S HEART OUT! THE LONE SURVIVOR, AN INDIAN SCOUT, SAID GEN. CUSTER WAS THE LAST TO FALL!

Next Week: Floyd Gibbons, World Famous Headline Hunter

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The Unknown Island

By FRED MacISAAC

Author of "Power," "The Golden Serpent," etc.

The sleeping camp of that stranded movie troupe was about to be rudely awakened—by an attacking horde of South Seas cannibals

Bates grasped the girl in his big arms

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

ON an unchartered island, somewhere in the South Seas, a movie troupe of thirty or so people have been stranded. Not even Stephen Desmond, their guide and interpreter, knows where they are, for Desmond was drugged and unconscious when the actors and their equipment were landed by Captain Delire, the man whose ship had been chartered to take the troupe to the Isle of Sevennes, two weeks' sailing from Tahiti.

Desmond, who is telling the story, regains consciousness, is chided by the other members of the party for his "drunkenness" but, upon realizing that they are on the wrong island, he keeps his peace and confers with J. Ponsomby Preudholm, director of the outfit. They agree that it is a ransom plot of Delire's, who has heard that Dora Demerest has been insured for a million dollars.

Desmond, circling the island in the outfit's motor launch, lands on the other side to investigate a dilapidated house. He is captured by a huge madman, a Frenchman who has made himself king of the several hundred black

This story began in the Argosy for July 16.

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cannibals on the isle. This man, who calls himself Napoleon the Fourth, hates all white men because his parents had been killed by white raiders when he was a child.

However, Napoleon is attracted by the blond beauty of Dora Demerest, and declares he will make her his own. Desmond escapes, makes his way back to the movie colony and warns Preudholm. A barricade is thrown up, rifles are unpacked, sentry watches are paid off and the camp prepares to repel invaders. Napoleon boldly comes up for a parley and is wounded in the leg when he attempts to abduct Desmond.

Meanwhile, Preudholm goes about the business of making a film, aided by Rosa de la Rose, a sparkling Mexican beauty; Miss Demerest, who unaccountably seems to hate Desmond, Raoul Homer, leading man and Nick Flake and Jake Gorham, camera men who saw service with Desmond in the World War. It is night, and an amplifier warns of an impending attack.

CHAPTER XIII.

NIGHT ATTACK.

"CALL out the men," Preudholm said tersely. "Do it quietly. I want to teach them a lesson."

In five minutes, twenty armed men were assembled, sleepy, pale and anxious. Preudholm sent five to each side of the stockade with orders not to fire until the lights went on. He put me in command of the force facing the plateau.

We had not disturbed the women but you couldn't give orders to a crowd of men in front of the tents without causing them to awake and, as I was leaving with my detachment, Rosa de la Rose came out wrapped in a bathrobe.

"Quick," said Preudholm, "it sounds as if they had started to run, and the guards haven't heard a sound."

In a minute I was on the firing step and realized that our stockade was much too large to be well defended by a small force. I had to post my men thirty feet apart. Hardly had we taken our places when a most appalling howl went up directly in front.

Instantly, where darkness had been, there was light. The great lamps threw a glare upon the ground for sixty or eighty yards ahead and caused a mob of savages to stop dead in their tracks. It looked to me as if there were two hundred of them in front of me and one of them, the man who had howled, was a fellow who had been in advance and who had stepped upon a heavily charged wire concealed in the grass.

They hesitated only a second and then a roar from a familiar bull-like voice drove them forward.

Shaking their spears, part of them charged while a hail of arrows pattered against the planking of the stockade.

"Fire!" I shouted, and six rifles began to pump lead into the black brutes. Their faces and bodies were streaked with white paint; their woolly hair was stuck full of plumes and bright flowers. They came on in a mass as bravely as German shock troops but they were bathed in synthetic daylight and our magazine rifles caused devastation among them. I heard heavy firing from right and left which indicated that they were attacking on flanks as well as center. Napoleon had sent his full strength against the stockade.

OUR rifles mowed them down, but what broke the assault was a charged wire strung two feet above the ground and fifty feet from the fence. Some of them laid hands

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upon it and were fried by the current. Others touched it with their legs and were hurled screaming, to the ground. The attack stopped at the wire despite the exhortations of Napoleon, whom I sought in the mob but could not find.

The unknown means of inflicting death, the inability of those who had caught hold of the wire to release their grip on it, put stark fear into their savage hearts. Those who were free to go took to their heels and we emptied our rifles at them. The slaughter was positively sickening, but the affair was over in a couple of minutes.

The ground in front of my command was covered with black forms, some twisting in agony, others stilled in death. We ceased firing when the others had escaped from the zone of light.

"Kill 'em!" I heard Preudholm shouting. I thought he meant the savages of whom there were no more to kill, but he was referring to the lights. Everything went black, which was a relief, but we could still smell the burning flesh of those caught on the wire.

"Anybody hurt?" I called along the line. There wasn't a scratch among the defenders on my side nor to the right or left. No attack had been made from the seaward side.

Preudholm appeared below me after a couple of minutes.

"First blood for us, eh?" he said coolly. "How many did we bag?"

"Forty or fifty at least. For Heaven's sake turn the current off those wires."

"I've just done so. Not much chance of another attack, is there?"

"I don't think it possible. They were wild with terror."

"I want to save juice. And the amplifier will warn us if they approach again. Judging by the racket it's making now there's a big powwow some distance off."

After half an hour we established double watch and sent the rest of the defenders to bed. We found the women clinging to each other. The character woman was in hysterics and Rosa and Dora were trying to calm her.

Preudholm coolly jabbed her with a needle and she was asleep in a couple of minutes.

I shook his hand.

"If we had had these appliances in the war," I said to him, "we could have abolished 'listening posts.'"

"Oh, the world has moved a lot since the war. I think we have accounted for a hundred and fifty savages. What will be their next move?"

"They will probably lurk about and try to pick us off if we venture out. I doubt if they attack again. Napoleon himself must have been petrified with amazement, though he may have read something about electric wires."

Every half hour until dawn we turned on the lights, and each time there were fewer bodies lying in front of our defenses. When morning came all dead and wounded savages had been carried off and no enemy was visible. As there had been little sleep, no work was done that day, and everybody except our sentinels turned in after breakfast to make up for lost slumber.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SCHOONER SADIE JONES.

A WEEK went by, after the crushing defeat of Napoleon the Fourth and his black horde, with no special excitement. Preudholm was working steadily on his original script. He explained to me that he could do

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all his intimate scenes inside the stockade, get plenty of surf and swimming stuff later and, after our rescue, could go back to Tahiti and shoot his big scenes with native actors.

I had become chief of the service of supplies and went forth each morning with two or three men in the launch and came back in the late afternoon with a variety of fine fish, with mussels, oysters and giant crawfish.

Occasionally we caught glimpses of savage scouts lurking on the shore or spying upon us from the plateau, but no effort was made by the enemy to attack us. My theory was that Napoleon had been forced to go home with his army and his wounded and that, very likely, they had carried off some of their dead for an unspeakable purpose.

Melanesian cannibals, so far as I knew, ate human flesh of enemies and did not eat one another, but this band had the appetite and, until we arrived, no enemies. Nor could I forget what I had seen at the village in the hills.

We figured he must have at least fifty or sixty wounded men, most of whom would recover with the rapidity of savages in perfect physical condition. That we were through with him was not to be considered. Napoleon, from what I had seen of him, would be boiling with revenge and for lust of the girl with the golden hair.

It had been impossible for the director to prevent the company from learning, by means of the radio, that the Belle Parisienne had been lost and that we were supposed to have been lost with it. A number of the electricians understood the telegraph codes which clicked through our loud speaker and after the first day there was a lot of talking via the radio telephone between ships and island stations, both in the French and English language.

American destroyers had been sent after us from Samoa and French gunboats had gone out from Tahiti. We heard a French ship reporting, from the spot on the ocean where the Parisienne's wreckage had been sighted, that she had cruised over a wide radius and visited islands within several hundred miles of the scene of the disaster, without a trace of survivors.

We had power enough to supply a broadcasting station with a radius of several hundred miles, but we lacked several vital bits of machinery; thus we were doomed to hear ourselves paged without being able to answer.

Being unaware that we had been marooned upon an island far out of the beaten track for a fell purpose, the radio reports heartened the company tremendously and those who had time on their hands scanned the sea daily for the sail or the smoke of a rescuing ship. And the ease with which we had defeated the savages had persuaded them that there was nothing to fear from that source, though they were careful never to wander far from the stockade.

ON the eighth morning after the battle I was in the launch with Murphy, who had acted as engineer upon the expedition round the island, and Homer, the leading man, who had turned out to be an excellent fisherman. The bottom of the boat was covered with beautiful and edible denizens of the deep that represented every color of the rainbow. I had just seen a two-foot beauty which had swallowed my hook and which I was rapidly drawing toward the boat swallowed whole by a fifteen-foot shark and had cut my line in haste to avoid trouble with that fellow when Murphy, who had been squatting over his engine, suddenly went crazy.

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"Whoopee!" he roared, leaping to his feet and waving his hands wildly. "A ship!"

At the same instant a gun was discharged from shore which indicated that the ship had been sighted from the camp. I gazed seaward and saw a two-masted schooner with bare poles almost hull down and far beyond the farthest reef.

She was moving under an auxiliary in the direction of the island and as I gazed she slipped inside a reef about eight miles out.

"She's coming in all right," I said slowly. "Let's get going, Murphy."

"Sure," he agreed. "We'll go out and meet her."

"We'll go ashore as fast as we can get there," I replied.

"But she may not know how to get through the reefs."

"And we can't tell her," I replied as I took the wheel. "Pull in your line, Mr. Homer."

"I fancy we're through fishing, what?" said the actor jubilantly.

Ten minutes later we approached the camp and found most of the company on the rocks in front of the stockade or up on the benches inside the fence. They were capering with joy.

During this time the schooner was weaving back and forth through the reefs in a manner which told me that the skipper knew his way.

I approached Preudholm, who was gazing at the vessel through his field glasses.

"Have a look," he invited. "Do you know her?"

I looked for a full minute through the binoculars and handed them back.

"She's an island schooner, probably in the copra trade," I said. "I don't know her. She has a bigger engine than most vessels of her size because she is making better time with it. And there's something under canvas at her bows which looks to me like a gun. Also she knows the channel."

"Well," he said, "she'll do to take us back to Tahiti. I think I can make my picture there, if I have to. Do you suppose she knows about us?"

"That type isn't apt to have a Marconi outfit. It may be some trader putting in for fresh water. And her visit may have something to do with the reason for marooning us here."

"They'll have seen our camp by this time. I should have erected a flagpole so we could run up the flag."

"Well, we'll find out what they want in about an hour. It will take her that long to zigzag into the cove below."

The company was so excited that the men ran around in circles, but the women retired and presently came forth in costumes suitable for traveling. As they looked at it, they would be aboard and away very shortly.

One of the irrepressibles put his rifle to his shoulder and fired ten shots.

Immediately a rifle was fired from the schooner. We could see through the glasses a group of seamen at the bow who were waving their arms excitedly. I looked for her name on her bow but, if it had ever been there, it had faded out or been painted over.

IN half an hour or so the schooner appeared at the entrance to the harbor, slipped through the opening in the cliff and let go her anchor. A longboat fell immediately into the water and six or eight men tumbled into it. They all carried rifles and they all looked like white men through the glasses, which was curious as such craft usually carry a native crew. Frequently the mates are natives, only the skipper being Caucasian.

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Preudholm distressed the women by ordering them inside the stockade, told the men to close the gates and, picking myself and four others, he instructed us to take our rifles and accompany him to the beach. His orders were obeyed sullenly by the rest of the troupe.

We walked rapidly along the shore, keeping a sharp eye upon the bush for savages and we were on the black sand as the boat pushed her nose into it.

The captain of the schooner was a tall, thin man with a head of thick hair which had been flaming red but which had been partially bleached by the sun. His blond hair contrasted strangely with his skin, which was almost as bronzed as a native's. He wore dirty white trousers, a sleeveless shirt, but neither coat nor hat. He was followed by a bunch of brawny, bearded sailors, several of whom were naked to the waist. He shifted his rifle to his left hand and waved at us in friendly fashion with his right.

"Who the deuce are you?" he shouted in good English. "I supposed this island was uninhabited."

I scrutinized him closely, but he was a stranger to me, and in my time I had run up against most of the island skippers. He was a fellow with a prominent nose, blue eyes set too close together, a large mouth full of yellow teeth and a jutting pointed chin.

"My name is Preudholm," the director said cordially. "I am in charge of a motion picture company. No doubt you have spotted our camp."

"I'll say I did, and you could have knocked me over with a feather," replied the captain. "Bates is my name. I'm skipper of that schooner, as you may have guessed. You're a Britisher, eh?"

"I was. I'm an American citizen now."

"Put it there. Say, we saw women on the shore."

Preudholm nodded. "Ladies of my company."

"Motion picture stars!" exclaimed Captain Bates. "You heard that, boys?"

There was a murmur of excitement and interest among his following.

"Imagine that," continued Captain Bates. "How come you picked this island? It ain't even charted."

"It's quite a long story," replied Preudholm. "What is the name of your schooner, captain?"

"The Sadie Jones," replied the captain. "We ran out of fresh water and I knew there was land in back of all these reefs. I didn't expect such a big island. Must be plenty of streams on it, eh?"

"Plenty," replied Preudholm. "You are welcome to all you want."

The skipper swung about. "Three or four of you row out and get the water casks," he commanded. "How about making a call at your camp, mister? I'd kind of like a squint at those film stars."

The director smiled and nodded. "Delighted to introduce you. You may be able to do us a favor and make some money, captain."

"You tell me how," replied the skipper enthusiastically.

PREUDHOLM walked along with him toward the camp while I dropped back and joined the group of seamen.

"You're away off your course, aren't you?" I asked one of them, a Frenchman.

"If you want questions answered, ask the captain," he said gruffly.

"To the devil with you," I replied in his own language.

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His right hand moved toward his belt where a long knife lay in its sheath. I walked back to our men, who had grouped together.

"Don't get too chummy with these fellows," I said in a low tone. "They are a tough lot."

"Desmond, c o me here," called Preudholm, and I hastened to catch up with the two leaders.

"Captain Bates says he'll take us back to Tahiti," he told me. "He has no passenger accommodations, but I don't think our crowd will mind living on deck, do you?"

"I don't think anybody will refuse to go," I said, smiling.

We were in front of one of the gates, which was opened as we approached, and Bates and his men walked in.

"Pretty neat job, that fence," said Bates. "Sort of waste of time building it, though. Nobody going to bother you."

"Then you have never been here before, captain?" I asked.

"New spot to me."

"You came through the reefs pretty nicely, sir," I commented.

"Got a mate that put in here once," he replied. "He had the wheel."

"Then you don't know that the island is full of black savages?" I looked him in the eye as I spoke and I saw that he didn't know it.

"Oh, ho!" he exclaimed. "Had trouble with them?"

"We beat off an attack about a week ago," Preudholm told him. "Fully five hundred in the band."

"Well, well!" the captain exclaimed. "We always come ashore armed when we don't know an island, but five hundred are a lot of savages. Black ones? It ain't possible in these longitudes."

Preudholm explained about the French plantation and its black slaves, and then invited the skipper into his tent for a highball. "I can give you ice," he boasted.

The red-headed man looked astonished. "That beats everything. Say, I'd sell my soul for a cold drink. Holy jumping Jehoshaphat!"

He was staring at Rosa de la Rose, who had come out of her tent in a clinging white dress and a big straw hat. She was smiling brilliantly as she came toward us.

"Miss Rosa de la Rose," said Preudholm. "You've seen her in films, perhaps."

"I'll say I have," the captain murmured. "I can't stand it. She's too damned good looking."

Rosa heard that and smiled more bewitchingly. Preudholm introduced her, whereupon all the performers except Dora Demerest came up to be introduced. The sailors from the Sadie Jones stood in a bunch and gaped at the Mexican girl, who loved the sensation she was creating.

"We'll have lunch in an hour," said Preudholm. "I hope you and your men will join us."

"I'll stay," Bates said with a loud laugh. "But the boys have to fill the water casks. If there are niggers round we don't want to be caught on the beach after dark."

Preudholm signaled me to follow and led the captain into his tent after Rosa had volunteered to sit beside the mariner at lunch.

He sent for ice, filled three glasses, and made to pour a drink of Scotch for me.

"Just charged water," I warned.

Bates's little eyes looked me over unpleasantly and he sneered.

"Teetotaler, eh?" he demanded.

"Reformed drunkard," I replied good naturedly.

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"That's different. Imagine having ice."

"NOW, about price," said Preudholm. "There are thirty-one of us. A hundred dollars a head?"

"Sure," said Bates. "But I can't take much of your machinery out there. The schooner's got some cargo, and we ain't got much hold room anyway."

"Copra?" I asked.

"No. We ain't been trading. We're out of Sydney for Tahiti."

"Aren't you pretty far to the north and east?" I hazarded.

"We hit a hurricane down below 'bout ten days ago and got off our course plenty."

"American schooner?"

"Nova Scotia."

"But you're an American."

"Oh, sure. Say, what's it to you?"

"Do you know Captain Delire of the Belle Parisienne?"

"Big Frenchman with black whiskers? Sure. I run into him once in a while on some island course."

"Look here, captain," said Preudholm, "is he a good navigator?"

"Good as any of us."

"Well, he was supposed to land us on Sevennes. Do you suppose he could make a mistake?"

Bates looked through his whisky glass at the tent opening.

"What kind of a mistake?"

"He landed us on this island and said it was Sevennes."

Bates roared with laughter at that. "Mister," he said, "if he ever seen Sevennes he could tell it from this place even if he hadn't sailed for ten days in the wrong direction. Sevennes has a mountain shaped like a pyramid that is two thousand feet high."

"A few days later, according to a Marconi that our radio set picked up, his vessel foundered. Some wreckage was identified by an Australian steamer."

I had signaled Preudholm, but he missed my signal.

"Oh, ho," said Bates. "Then nobody knows you're on this island."

"Well, no," admitted the director.

The red-headed man grinned. "Kind of lucky that the Sadie Jones slipped in here. No ships ever touch here. Nobody knows there is such an island. You might be here for years. You might all die here."

"Oh, no," replied J. Ponsomby hastily. "Warships are searching for us at this minute. We hear them talking continually."

"They won't come here. It's six hundred miles east of Sevennes, it's uncharted and there are too many reefs if they do come this way, I could charge you ten thousand dollars, Mr. Preudholm. You'd have to pay."

Preudholm's jaw tightened and he didn't answer.

"But I'm a man of my word, I am. Three thousand I said and three thousand it is," he said heartily.

Now I didn't believe that Bates was a man of his word. I knew his breed and it wasn't natural for one of these fellows to pass up an opportunity of this sort.

"I'll leave you two together," I said and I strolled out of the tent.

CHAPTER XV.

PIRATES.

ROSA was sitting with Dora Demerest outside the star's tent and she beckoned to me imperiously.

"Mr. Desmond," she said, "we have not had time to get acquaint', eh? It

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is because you are so busy and I am so busy and now we go away from this island of devils and I shall be seasick, shall I not?"

I smiled, thinking of the odors of this schooner which was by no means as well cared for, judging by its outward appearance, as La Belle Parisienne.

"I am inclined to think you will be seasick," I stated.

"Pooh, it is no matter. Dora, darling, you do not like Mr. Desmond, do you?"

"You ask very embarrassing questions, Rosa," replied the blond girl with a blush.

Rosa laughed gaily. "Yet he is the hero of us all. Ponsomby told me that without him he could have accomplished nothing here. And he has escaped from the savages by jumping over the waterfall. You should admire him."

Dora looked confused and rose in haste.

"I'll go," I said quickly. "Thanks for the kind words, Miss de la Rose."

I walked toward the gate, but hearing rapid steps behind me I turned. It was Miss Demerest.

"I beg your pardon," she said. "I wanted to say—that is—we are going to leave the island—"

"Yes, Miss Demerest," I said coldly.

"You are the Stephen Desmond who was an officer in the intelligence bureau during the war and who married Mildred Holworth?"

"Yes," I said eagerly. "How do you—"

She stiffened and her cheeks grew pink. "I thought I might have made a mistake. Of course you have plenty of physical courage. It appears that I was not mistaken. That is all, Mr. Desmond."

She turned. I reached out, grasped her arm and whirled her around.

"Look here," I said harshly, "I answered your questions. Now you answer mine. You've been nasty to me ever since I met you. You've called me rotten names though I never saw or heard of you until you landed in Tahiti. What do you know about Stephen Desmond and Mildred Holworth? Who appointed you a judge of other people's conduct? What action of mine has been so criminal or despicable that you should call me a scoundrel?"

She threw back her head and turned scornful eyes on me.

"Let go my arm," she commanded. "You have Mr. Preudholm's confidence and your bravery has won the esteem of the company. I have said nothing to anybody which might injure you in their eyes, but you know what you have done and if you had a spark of conscience you wouldn't ask me to remind you of it. That's all."

I let her go because I couldn't hold her without making a scene and after a minute I went on to the gate, raging inwardly, had them open it and let me out. Without taking common precautions, I made my way along the shore to the beach where the schooner's boat, piled high with water casks, was coming in.

In a couple of minutes I heard a rattle and rumble behind me and I saw our tractor coming down. Preudholm had sent it to aid the sailors in transporting their casks to the river and back again.

The rocks below our camp made loading difficult. On the other hand there was a chance of attack upon the sailors going to and from the river. As they had been warned of the presence of savages and were well armed and accustomed to brushes with island

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peoples, that didn't seem to bother the crew of the Sadie Jones.

THE caterpillar truck arrived, the casks were loaded upon it and our driver started for the river. The seamen t r u d g e d along behind, keeping a sharp eye on the bush. Two men remained with the boat, ready to push off in case of trouble. I sauntered over and got into conversation with them.

"How come you've got a white crew?" I asked.

"Skipper won't have Kanakas," said a whiskered giant with a Scandinavian accent.

"Seems to me I've run across him somewhere," I insinuated.

The other man, a small dark Portuguese, spoke up.

"You one of them actors?" he asked.

"No. I've been out in the islands for years."

"The captain he been a lot of places," he replied to my first remark.

"That a gun you got under canvas?" I asked, nodding toward the schooner.

"None of your damn business," replied the Scandinavian.

I laughed. "Looks like a gun," I remarked. "What business is your schooner in?"

"Shell. What do you think?" replied the Portuguese.

I shrugged my shoulders and strolled off. No information to be secured from them. A gun and a white crew on a hundred-foot schooner looked suspicious to me. And I didn't like the captain. If he had been what we called an honest man in the islands, he would have squeezed the last penny out of Preudholm when the director had revealed indiscreetly that the loss of La Belle Parisienne, after landing us on an unknown island, had cut us off from the world.

I wondered why they had come to this island. Had they heard that the white king had pearls? But I had supposed that the skipper was surprised to learn that there were savages on what Napoleon called New Europe.

Slowly I walked back to camp, sunk so deep in thought that I would have been an easy mark for a savage.

I was thinking about Dora Demerest. Probably it was a good thing for me that the girl disliked me. She was so beautiful that I might have been fool enough to fall in love with her. That was a laugh. A young woman who earned six thousand a week and whose life was insured by her employers at a million dollars—and a recent beachcomber who was temporarily receiving fifty dollars a week.

Preudholm had guessed that she might have taken me for somebody else, but she knew my name and the name of the woman I had married. Before we left the islands I would find a way to force her to tell me what she had against me.

I went down and watched the seamen fill the water casks for a while and then I went in to lunch. Preudholm had Miss Demerest at his right and Captain Bates at his left. Rosa sat on the other side of the captain and did her best to dazzle the seaman, but I observed that he kept his unpleasant eyes turned toward Miss Demerest as much as possible. I sat at a table with my friends the camera men, the chief property man and head electrician and occasionally a snatch of conversation at the head table would be wafted my way.

I heard the captain tell Preudholm that he would give up his cabin to the ladies, but that the rest of us would have to flop wherever we found a va-

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cant plank. And he said he would land us in Tahiti in ten days and would make a return trip for the balance of the machinery if the company would make it worth his while.

The prospect of hardships on the voyage did not dampen the happy expectations of the troupe, who didn't care under what conditions they left an island teeming with black savages. Quite a little wine was opened and everybody became merry.

Bates told Preudholm that he wanted to take a day to clean ship and would embark us the following afternoon. He left immediately after lunch and by two o'clock all the water casks had been filled and the Sadie Jones's crew were on board their vessel.

I SOUGHT Preudholm and told him frankly that I was suspicious of the schooner and her skipper.

"Three thousand dollars must seem a lot of money to him," he replied. "What purpose could he have in double crossing us?"

"Delire double crossed us, didn't he? I tell you, Ponsomby, this is not a peaceful island schooner. I'm certain they have a one-pound gun at the bow of the ship and they have too many men on board. A vessel that size usually carries about six Kanakas. And the crew won't talk. That's a bad sign."

"Admitting all that," he said thoughtfully, "we're in no position to refuse proffered transportation. If anything happens to members of my company, I'll be blamed. We were lucky not to lose a life in that night attack. Next time we may have people killed. If a member of the mechanical crew loses his life in line of duty it will cost the company plenty. If anything happens to one of these women, I'll be through in Hollywood. They may have a dozen men but we number twenty-eight men. We have weapons and we ought to be able to take care of ourselves."

"I think there are more than a dozen in his crew."

"Even so, we outnumber them."

"The first thing he will do before we go aboard is force us to turn over our arms. Any sea captain would do that. I tell you that the mere fact of his visit to this island within a couple of weeks of our landing here is suspicious. Delire felt positive that the island was never visited or he wouldn't have dumped us on it. And Napoleon said it had been many years since white men have landed here."

"You think Bates knew we were on the island?"

"Yes."

"That would mean that he is standing in with Delire."

"It's possible."

"But there won't be anything in it for the crooks if we turn up in Tahiti now. We've been listening in on all reports. No big reward has been offered yet for our discovery."

"I admit that," I said glumly.

"Put yourself in my position. I'm responsible. If it costs Mammoth a few hundred thousand to get us back, I'll lose my job. If we refuse to go with Captain Bates it's reasonably certain that no other means of transportation will offer. I have to take any chance to get away before Mammoth or the insurance companies have to pay huge sums for our ransom. If we let this fellow go we'll be here when Delire's people come after us, six months from now, perhaps, unless Napoleon has gobbled us up in the meantime. You keep your eyes open and so will I, but I'm breaking camp at dawn!"

"I suppose you're right."

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"Furthermore, salaries go on during all the time we are away. The expenses of the expedition are about three thousand dollars a day. We are allotted two months for the round trip and to make the film. Figure out for yourself what six months' delay will cost the producers in addition to some gigantic ransom."

"You're just as right as you can be," I admitted. "Of course we have to sail on the Sadie Jones."

Naturally work was suspended during the remainder of the day. The company was seething with delight and satisfaction. The schooner lay in the bay, a clumsy squat craft badly in need of paint, but to the motion picture folks she was as beautiful to look at as the Bremen or the Ile de France.

The camera men took the launch and went out and made motion pictures of her while the crew lined the rail and waved to them good naturedly.

Dinner, that night, was a banquet. Everybody made speeches. Even the rat, Kernan, felt called upon to come up and shake my hand and tell me he harbored no ill feelings. Of course we posted our sentries as usual, and did not relax vigilance. There was a possibility that Napoleon, alarmed by the arrival of a vessel to carry away his golden-haired woman, might attack.

I was on the early watch on the plateau side. There was no moon, but our microphones were working for us and registered no sound except the whispers of the island night. Far up in the hills I could see the pinpoints of light which were the fires of the village I had mistaken, during the first phase of my flight from Napoleon's capital, for our camp.

At twelve o'clock I crawled into my tent where Nick and Jake were snoring happily. An hour later I was awakened by a terrific detonation. I rolled out of my cot and ran outside. Rifles were being fired from the ocean side of the stockade. Preudholm had darted immediately to the power house and turned the switch that flooded the camp and its environs with light.

The gate to the stockade on the sea quarter had been blown in, and a mob of armed men had rushed into the inclosure.

"Throw down your guns," shouted Captain Bates. "Surrender or I'll blow ye all to bits."

"We surrender," shouted Preudholm. "Come in, men. Drop your rifles. We don't want the women hurt." Resistance was hopeless of course.

CHAPTER XVI.

ON THE SCHOONER.

BATES strode forward. "That's the talk," he bellowed. "Line up, every man jack of you. Women, too."

Preudholm walked toward him and eyed him contemptuously.

"So you're a pirate," he said coolly.

"Do a little of everything," replied the red-headed man, grinning wickedly. "How much American money you got?"

"Twenty thousand dollars. And ten thousand dollars in French money."

"Hear that, men?" shouted Bates. His ruffians cheered lustily.

Our men were coming from their posts on all sides of the stockade and those who had been in their tents had emerged in various stages of undress.

The character woman was rending the air with her shrieks. Rosa was cowering against Dora Demerest, who held her head up bravely.

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"Get in line, get in line. Cover 'em, men," commanded Bates. "Now Mr. Motion Picture Boss, where's the money?"

"In a chest in my tent."

"You and me will go get it."

"At least allow the ladies to dress," said Preudholm.

Bates laughed and waved his hand.

"Sure," he agreed. And you," he pointed to Dora, "get all your duds. You're going with me."

There was a moment of horror-struck silence, and then a shout of protest from the film company.

"Shoot anybody who makes trouble," bellowed Bates. "Nobody is going to be hurt, but I'm taking that million dollar girl."

I had joined the line perforce and I was standing in front of the entrance of the little power house. I cast a rapid glance around. Nobody was paying any attention to me. I slipped through the open door and fumbled for the switches which controlled the four batteries of flood lights. I didn't know which were which and I tried everything.

Suddenly all lights went out.

Amid the angry shouts of the pirates and the roars of Captain Bates to "turn on those lights," I slid out and around the power house and ran at top speed for the plateau side of the stockade. I knew my way in the dark. I reached the fence in half a minute and went up upon the bench and over the wall. Keeping close to the fence I ran around it and dashed along the path to the beach.

I was aware that there were lurking savages, but that was a chance I had to take. I suppose I made pretty near record time to the beach, but there, to my distress, I found no boat upon the sands. My intention had been to capture the boat, force the men on board to take me to the schooner, take charge of her, turn the gun on the camp and compel Captain Bates and his bullies to surrender.

I WAS unarmed, clad only in shorts, but I hoped to surprise the two men at the boat, disarm them, and then use their weapons against the one or two men on the schooner. The chances were a hundred to one against my accomplishing this feat, but it was better than submitting supinely, like the rest of the troupe, and watching the pirate Bates sail away with Dora Demerest. The whole cracked-brain scheme had occurred to me in the fraction of a second after he declared that he would carry off the million dollar girl.

Bates would disarm the picture people and carry off their weapons, ammunition and anything else in camp which appealed to him. That we would fall an easy prey to the savages wouldn't bother him in the least. Not only the safety of Miss Demerest but the lives of all of us depended upon my success.

It was evident that the pirates had not landed upon the beach, but had rowed with muffled oars around to the cove in front of the camp.

They had crept silently up the rocks, hurled a bomb at the gate and burst into the stockade. Had we placed a microphone on that side their approach would have been revealed, but, anticipating no attack from the sea, Preudholm had not taken such a precaution.

There was still a remote chance. I might take the schooner by surprise before Bates and his band returned. With some hesitation I entered the water.

No man can loaf around South Seas beaches for years without becoming a splendid swimmer, and I could swim

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as well as any Kanaka. Nevertheless I had the white man's terror of going into the water at night, and I did not even have a knife with which to protect myself.

The schooner lay half a mile out, a dim light showing to indicate her position. The sea teemed with horrible things; huge sharks, savage barracudas and such. Most of all I feared the sting ray which I had often seen doing its deadly work below as I leaned over a ship's rail. This is a huge flat fish shaped like a kite and often as big as a barn door. It has a tail like a whip. Lord help the swimmer who encounters him.

I swam with lusty strokes, but hardly was I half way to the ship when I heard the sound of oars. I forgot my terror of the horrible things beneath the surface of the tropic sea and my utter helplessness should they attack me, and swam faster. I reached the ship's side perhaps ten minutes after I struck out from shore, but I could hear the oars very plainly and even the sound of voices as the boat approached.

A ladder dangled over the side, but I had too much sense to mount it, because it would be watched. I swam to the bow, found the anchor chain and began to climb up on it. Just as I had clapped hands on the rail, the longboat ran alongside and the pirates began to come on board. Too late.

I swung over the rail and dropped flat on deck. Four men clambered up the ladder and one of them held in his arm a burden in a white dress. Dora.

I cursed under my breath. I made out Bates by the dim light of the lantern amidships. He took the girl from the sailor's arms and stood her on her feet. So she hadn't fainted. No, she walked steadily aft with him and disappeared through the cabin entrance.

Little thoroughbred. No shrieks, no hysterics, no collapse, yet she had been dragged away from her friends by a South Seas pirate and carried on board his ship. Of all the people in the company, that girl alone had been rotten to me, but there I was grinding my teeth and mouthing silent curses—and swearing to get her out of the clutches of the unspeakable Bates.

Most of these old down-East schooners were built by farmer seafarers of Maine and Nova Scotia in farmyards that happened to touch a bay or river. They were built for service, not for beauty, for endurance rather than speed, and some of them are still afloat and more than a century old.

The Sadie Jones was of this type, a bluff bowed, broad beamed, solid oak craft, a slow sailor and a good sea boat. If I remembered the type, the cabin was a house on deck with a two-foot space between it and the taffrail, and there were stern ports in the cabin.

THERE were three men lounging on deck, and the moon was going to be up in a few minutes. I hesitated, then went over the rail again, down the anchor chain into the water, and as I sank in the warm sea I heard men getting into the boat. I swam around the weather side of the schooner, being careful not to splash, and thinking not at all of the fish which might be lurking in the vicinity of a craft likely to throw over edibles.

In ten seconds I was under the broad stern and grasping the rudder. I had prayed to find a line dangling and my prayer was answered. It was ten feet to the rail, but with a rope and my bare feet such a climb was nothing to me. I had learned to go up coconut trees. I found time to marvel, as I climbed, at the kind of engine which

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could drive this old hooker through the water as fast as I had seen her come in, and then I pulled myself over the rail and flopped down in the space between it and the after bulkhead of the cabin. There were two ports just above me. Light was streaming through and they were open. I heard voices.

"A little drink won't hurt you," Bates was saying.

"No," answered Dora curtly.

"You might as well have a good time," he urged. "It won't get you nothing to be nasty."

"I don't like liquor and I don't like you."

He laughed roughly. "You'll change your mind about me," he told her. "Red-headed men go big with the dames."

"If you lay hands on me I'll kill myself," she said quietly. "And then you'll lose a lot of money, Captain Bates."

He laughed again. "You won't get any chance to kill yourself, baby. And we're going to have a few weeks—Well, what do you want?"

A sailor had pounded on the cabin door. I heard Bates cross the cabin to open it, and I rose and peered within. There was an oil lamp and a bottle of whisky on a table. Dora was sitting beside the table with her back to me.

"See Dorgan, damn you," roared the captain in response to some question and slammed the door. I dropped below the port.

I heard the neck of a bottle tinkle against a glass as the captain poured himself a drink.

"I'm not for thin women," he said coarsely, "but you got something, miss. Them eyes of yourn are wonderful, all right. At first I thought that Mex was the best looking and I couldn't see how you was worth a million, but the more I see of you the better I like you. Damned if I don't."

"Thanks," she said dryly. "Captain Bates, how much of the reward you expect to get do you have to share with Captain Desmond?"

I want to tell you that my flesh crawled at the import of her inquiry.

"Desmond?" puzzled the captain.

She made an impatient sound. "This is his plot," she declared angrily. "You never figured out for yourself how you could hold up an insurance company. He deliberately induced Captain Delire to land us on this island to give you your opportunity to kidnap me. Don't lie, Captain Bates."

I DON'T suppose any man hated a woman as much as I hated Dora Demerest as I lay under the port and heard her accusation. I was torn between two desires, to jump up and tell her what I thought of her or to go over the side and swim ashore in complete indifference to her fate.

I knew what was on the schedule for Dora Demerest. She would be forced to live with the red-headed brute for months until he made arrangements to exchange her for a huge sum of money. His embraces would be loathsome to the haughty, cold-blooded film star. I didn't care. I hoped he would beat her.

"I'm smarter than you think, young woman," replied Bates hotly. "Who in hell is Desmond? Some one in Tahiti?"

She laughed scornfully. "No doubt you promised to conceal his part in this despicable plot. He is the man who persuaded Mr. Preudholm to admit you to our camp. He induced our director to take him as an expert on the islands. He engaged Captain Delire and his schooner to transport us to Sevennes and had us landed here for your convenience."

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"You mean the tall dark guy that came down to my boat with Preudholm when we first landed?" asked Bates. "He's under guard at the camp with the rest of your folks. So he's their man, eh? That's damn funny."

"As though you didn't know," she said contemptuously.

"Baby," he replied, "this is my scheme. I thought it up myself. I'm going to get all the money the insurance company pays for your safe return. Neither Desmond nor anybody else is in it with me. When the gang in Tahiti make their deal and send a ship here to pick you people up, they won't find Dora Demerest. We're going to a place nobody but me knows about and lie low till the reward is big enough. Delire is working for a Chinese crowd, little one. Tom Bates is working for Tom Bates and nobody else."

"In other words, you are double crossing Mr. Desmond and his friends," she said bitingly.

"I don't double cross nobody," he assured her. "I'm smart, I am. Listen, now. I sail into Tahiti the day Delire leaves with your outfit. I go to a hang-out of mine. I find a Chinese there that is wise to the whole scheme. You're insured for a million against accidental death. Certain big men in Papeete get to Delire and arrange to land you on this island instead of Sevennes and leave you here until the insurance people come through. Delire's ship is supposed to founder. There is a search. When the reward is big enough, an expedition goes out of Papeete and finds you without any trouble at all.

"Well, I know this island. I was here ten years ago. I fix it with my Chink that I'll run in and take you off and leave the rest of 'em for the other saps to make the most of."

"In that case you will have to take very good care of me," said Dora shrewdly, "because if you lay a finger on me, I'll report your behavior to the authorities."

He laughed. "By that time I'll have the money and be on my way. I've had a lot of sweethearts, brown and yellow and some white, I've never had a blond woman yet. Come here."

CHAPTER XVII.

IN THE SEA.

THERE was a rush of feet, a scream, a thump and I rose and peered through the port. Bates had grasped the girl in his big arms, squeezed her fiercely and dropped with her upon a chair and was pressing his dirty mouth to hers. She was clawing him, and kicking wildly and futilely. I saw her face. It was ghastly and despair was in her eyes.

I rushed around the cabin, kicked open the door, and dove through it. Bates sat with his back to me about three feet away and my hands went round his throat as I fell into the cabin. My fall pulled him backward, and man and girl and chair landed upon me, but my grip on his throat only tightened. He thrashed and kicked, but he could not shout because I had shut off his wind. Dora rolled away from us and got to her feet, looking down with horror.

Bates managed to get on top of me, but couldn't break my grip. I have strong fingers and I would not let him twist around to bring us breast to breast. His struggles grew weaker. His legs kicked spasmodically. Gradually he ceased to move, but relentlessly I choked him.

"He's dead," she said at last. "For God's sake, stop!"

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I knew he wasn't dead yet, but I intended that he should be. I squeezed his gullet harder. At last I threw him off and climbed to my feet. His face was black, his tongue was protruding. I thought that he was probably dead.

"Mr. Desmond," she said. "What shall we do?"

I had forgotten for a second that we had much to do.

"Can you swim?" I asked harshly. She nodded.

"We've got to go over the stern and swim ashore," I said shortly. "I'll help you if it's too much for you."

"I'll go," she said quickly. "I've got to go."

"Take off that dress, then."

"But I've only undies—"

"It'll be dark. Hurry up."

Without a word she pulled off her dress and stood forth in white satin trunks and a brassiere. Her figure was beautiful. Feeling toward her as I did, I had to admit that.

"Quiet now," I whispered. "A sound will betray us."

SHE clambered like a cat around to the stern and I followed. We stood in the space between cabin and rail. The ship's wheel was on the roof of the cabin, but there was no one there. They had a couple of men on watch who were smoking their pipes and gossiping amidships. The moon was up, however, which was bad. The sound of the splash of a dive would alarm them.

I found a line and whispered to her that I would have to lower her into the water and then I remembered that I was unarmed.

"Wait," I commanded, and reëntered the cabin. From the body of Captain Bates I unbuckled his belt, from which revolver and sheath knife hung, and fastened it around my waist.

Out again and then I was lowering the pale trembling girl into the black warm water after which I slid down the rope and floated beside her.

"Swim carefully," I warned. "No splashing. Come on."

Side by side we cut through the water and no cry of alarm came from the schooner. Those on board had no reason to be alert since our camp was in their possession and they lay half a mile from shore. And in the moonlight a native outrigger would be plainly visible before it came within dangerous distance of the vessel.

Neither of us spoke as we swam, for half a mile requires conservation of breath. I admired the cleanness of her strokes and she traveled along almost as fast as an island swimmer. I did not know then that she was the champion of the Santa Monica Swimming Club. Presently we approached the beach.

"Well," she called, "we're in."

I reached out and grasped her arm. "Stop," I gasped. "Oh, my God!"

For the black beach was not black—it was sort of greenish gray in the moonlight and it was in motion or so it seemed. It *was* in motion! It was covered with an army of huge crabs, thousands and thousands of them; the same man-eating crabs that were one of the pests of Sevennes.

"Can't land," I said curtly. "Head for the rocky point at the left where we camped the first night."

"But why?—Oh, how horrible!" She had seen the crabs. She did not know that they would tear to pieces and devour any living thing in their path, but they looked fearsome enough without that knowledge.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

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SOME LANDMARKS AHEAD

HERE'S a chart of some of the ports at which ARGOSY will call in the next few weeks:

August 20th brings us to "The World Series Murders," a mystery novel of big league baseball by H. L. McNary. The novelettes are a Whispering Tale of the desert by Erle Stanley Gardner and a crime story in a banknote factory, by Ray Cummings.

W. C. Tuttle gives us a rollicking Western comedy-adventure starting August 27th, with a long novelette of an air transport company by Thomson Burtis.

"King Mob," by Robert Carse, starts September 3rd—a novel you can't afford to miss. What will gangland do *after Prohibition is repealed?* It's a highly exciting and convincing novel. Theodore Roscoe and Foster-Harris give us novelettes of the Legion and of the Southwestern oilfields.

Denis Burke, corsair of the Spanish Main, returns in H. Bedford-Jones's novelette, "Buccaneering Blood," September 10th. Lieut. John Hopper starts a novel of the U. S. Army fighting spies in the Canal Zone; and there's a Western novelette by Eugene Cunningham.

Edgar Rice Burroughs features the September 17th issue. His latest novel, "The Pirates of Venus," is his first story laid on that planet—and any one who has followed *Tarzan, John Carter* of Mars, and the adventurers of Pellucidar will be thrilled to watch *Carson Napier* start his adventures on unknown Venus.

FERRIN FRASER, who steps aboard the ARGOSY with "One Error," introduces himself:

We started writing at a very tender age—even submitted a number of stories to your magazine because the old ship which used to sail on your cover intrigued us. While at Columbia University we were fortunate enough to study under John Erskine at the time of his "Private Life of Helen of Troy." He was kind enough to be interested in our work and it was due to him that our first novel, "Lovely Ladies," was published. We were known at that time—1927—as his protégé. Since then we have had three other novels published together with a book of verse and have consistently written for *Collier's, Red Book, Liberty, College Humor, Country Home, Smart Set,* and *Ladies' Home Journal.* "One Error" is our first yarn in ARGOSY, and we are proud to have at last made the first magazine we ever submitted to.

FERRIN FRASER.

REQUESTING a story of ancient Rome:

Bronx, N. Y.

I am glad to see that Austin Hall's mystic and fantastic novel, "The Spot of Life," is on its way.

"Rapiers Ride!" was fine. More like it. The adventures of *Graydon* were highly interesting.

The stories of Lowell Thomas are slow in getting under way. Worts's story, "The Magpie Murders," is not so good. Too much detail. I love his courtroom sequences.

How about another short story from Theodore Goodridge Roberts? His story, "The Hammock," was fine.

"The Tiger of Yezo" was a very amusing if not intriguing story. One or two more like it would be dandy.

One favor please. How about a story (a long

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serial) concerning ancient Rome? There are many plots that could be made up. A story, perhaps, similar to "Ben Hur." Many readers would like this type of story, I believe. "Breath of the Desert" is wonderful. Good story.

ROBERT HENRY.

A LOUD cheer for "Rapiers Ride!"

Chicago, Ill.

I have been reading ARGOSY off and on for several years, but this is the first time I have got such a great "kick" from a story that I have wanted to write and tell you about it. "Rapiers Ride!" by J.-J. des Ormeaux, is a thriller! I consider it the best story I have ever read since Dumas's novels. Marvelous action all the way, but I didn't have to stretch my imagination to believe it, the way I often have to with other stories. All five of us in the office here have read "Rapiers Ride!" and we are all signing our names to this letter asking as hard as we can for more stories by M. des Ormeaux. By the way, is he really a Frenchman? Why don't you tell us something about him?

B. P. FRIEDMAN,
H. L. NATHANSON,
BURTON BURUZAK,
H. D. FRIEDMAN,
ROBERT DESMET.

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Editor, ARGOSY,
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The stories I like best in this issue of the magazine are as follows:

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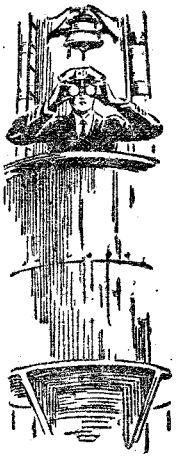

Looking Ahead!

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Château of Missing Men

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By H. BEDFORD-JONES

Safari

A novelette of lion-hunters on the African veldt.

By JAY BRIEN CHAPMAN

NINE STORIES IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—AUGUST 13th

9 A—6

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